ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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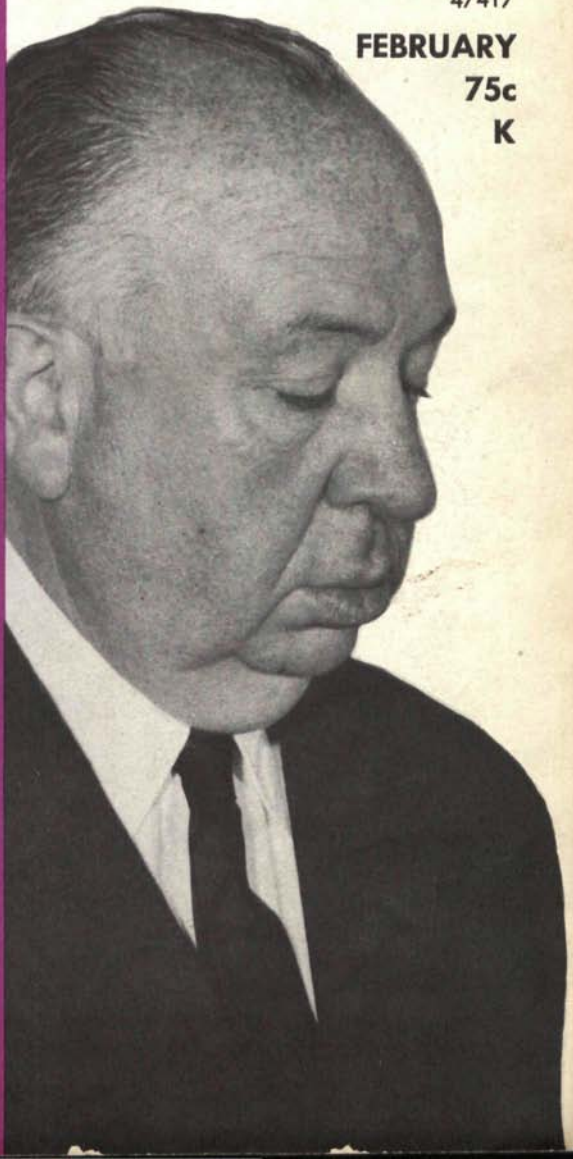

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

February 1975

Dear Reader:

Slaybells rung by a host of your favorite creators of murderous belles lettres summon you this month to another gallery of macabre chicanery—and there is every indication of another satisfyingly homicidal year ahead.

For now, if you are weary of holiday entertaining and wish instead to be entertained, you have chosen wisely. Pauline C. Smith is the bellwether, with *A Little Bit of a Jigsaw Puzzle* (whatever happened to Mama?), and Joseph Payne Brennan caps the affair with an eerie novelette featuring Lucius Leffing and titled *The Dead of Winter Apparition.*

With so many bellicose belligerents looming on paper, it is plain that I will have weighty decisions to make for your benefit in the months ahead. However, it is no mystery that I resolved anew just recently to track down the best of the bell-ringers for your continued

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
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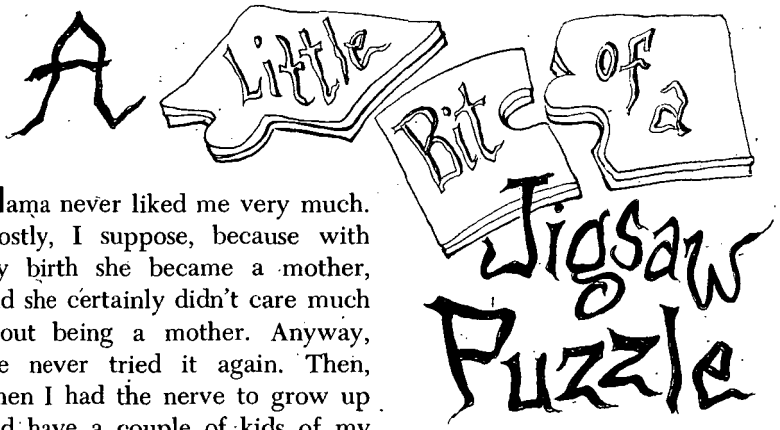
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 2, February 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions $9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

Phenomenally, one realizes it is only the aggregate of all the little bits and fragments which will project the whole.



Mama never liked me very much. Mostly, I suppose, because with my birth she became a mother, and she certainly didn't care much about being a mother. Anyway, she never tried it again. Then, when I had the nerve to grow up and have a couple of kids of my own, making her a *grandmother*, she liked me even less.

Mama, you see, always thought of herself as a winsomely young and frolicsome lass which Papa, who was almost twenty years older, enthusiastically fostered by calling her "Little Bit," and never allowing a whit of sadness or responsibility to come her way until he died this spring, and he certainly couldn't help that.

"Oh, hell!" moaned Jeff when we got the news. "She'll probably have to come here and live with us!"

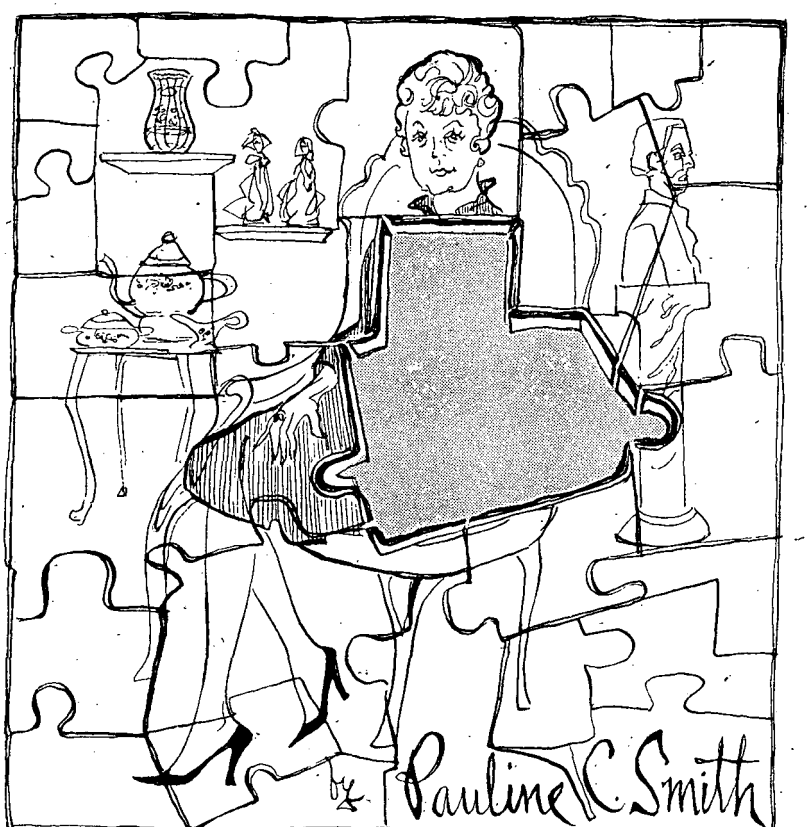
I was too busy packing a bag and telling the kids, Steve, 14, and Carolyn, 12, to take care of their father and Jeff to take care of the kids, to think about that dire probability until I was out on the freeway. Then I thought about it during every one of those 350 miles, all through the funeral, and afterward.

When I suggested the new living arrangement to Mama, she stood there, her pointy toes and very high heels solidly dug into her Persian rug in her plush livingroom, surrounded by her majolica and porcelains, and said in

her little-girl treble that she would do very well right where she was, and *I* realized that now I'll have to worry about her long-distance instead of close-up.

"But Mama, not all alone," I cried.

She could get along great, Mama said, standing there in all her five-foot, 98 pounds of bleached blonde black-veiled glory, ticking off on her gloved fingers her pillars of strength: Mr. Merrick to send her monthly check, Joe Gomez to mow her lawn and Mrs. Herter to flick a dust cloth over the house twice a week. She didn't even want any help in selling the car, a venerable Cadillac she couldn't drive;



as a matter of fact, she didn't think she'd sell it at all.

"Why not?" I screamed faintly, and she informed me, with great dignity, that she just might learn to drive it, so I screamed again.

"Now why don't you run along, Margaret," she directed me. "Run along to your husband and children . . ." This right after the funeral! I had spent only two nights and a day and a half at the side of my bereaved mother in mourning for my deceased father! What could I do? I ran along.

Before I ran very far, though, I stopped at the office of Mr. Merrick, who said with a banker's smile that Mama was in fine shape financially, which was all that mattered to him. It was the same with Mrs. Herter, who considered any widow with a roof over her head a lucky widow indeed, and Joe Gomez promised to mow and fertilize weekly.

Even Jeff, when I arrived home shattered, wondered what all the flak was about. "Sounds to me as if the old girl is taking it very well," he said in his adman's hearty *we'll run her up the flagpole and see if she flies* voice.

So I, feeling this genetic responsibility for a wisp of 61-year-old girlhood who still wears pointy stilt-heeled pumps and pointy padded bras, was the only one concerned. "She's always had someone to take care of her," I worried.

"It's time, then, she took care of herself," said Jeff.

"But she doesn't know how," I agonized.

Jeff laughed as he said, "She knows how to get what she wants."

It turned out, I guess, that we were both right.

Since Mama was the I-won't-call-you, you-call-me type, I called every week, and our short-winded telephonic conversations went about like this:

Me: "How are you, Mama?"

Mama: "Just fine, dear," in her tinkling voice.

Me: "Is Mrs. Herter doing her job?"

Mama: "Yes, dear."

Me: "Is Joe Gomez mowing the lawn?"

Mama: "Yes, dear," succinct and noninformative until a couple of months after Papa's death, when she let drop a surprising bit of news: "I am learning to drive the car."

"Mama!" I screamed. "Who is teaching you?"

"Why, a young man from the Driving School," she said.

I told Jeff, "She's too old to learn to drive," and he said he'd heard of women older than her

who learned to drive, and I said I thought I ought to go down there and see what was going on, and he told me not to be a fool, that Mama was doing her thing and she not only wouldn't like interference, she wouldn't stand for it.

I figured he was right, knowing Mama, and knowing how she didn't like me much anyway.

Our telephone exchanges became a bit more lively with the driving lessons, which she took daily. "How are you getting along?" I asked. "Oh, fine," she said, and after a couple of months of this, I asked her if she wasn't about ready to take her driver's test.

Mama: (airily) "There's plenty of time for that. As long as I have someone to drive me around . . ."

"What did I tell you?" said Jeff triumphantly. "Your mother knows how to get what she wants, so she signed up for driving lessons and got herself a daily chauffeur."

Actually, I was somewhat relieved that Mama was putting off the day she would drive alone, and my conversational questions regressed to: "Is Mrs. Herter doing her job?" and "Is Joe Gomez mowing the lawn?" both of which received the submissive if laconic replies of "yes," for another month or so when Mama unaccountably answered, "I let them go, dear, the two of them."

"Mama," I screamed, "why?"

"Because I wanted to, Margaret," she said.

When Mama changes her impersonal "dear" to the highly personal use of my given name, it means she wants me to shut my mouth because what I am using it for is none of my business. "Don't you have anybody to clean the house and mow the lawn?" I screamed, and she said, with great dignity, "Yes, Margaret, I have." Period.

"Maybe I'd better go on down there," I told Jeff.

"What for?" he asked.

"Oh, to look over the cleaning woman and see who she's got for a yard man."

"For Pete's sake," he said, "let her live her own life."

I mentioned casually to Mama, the next time I called, "I thought I might come down to see you," and she said, "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said, "just for a little visit."

"I might be gone," she said.

"Gone? Where?" I screamed.

Then she came back with a couple of non sequiturs and three or four feminine obliquities that indicated, mostly, an antipathy for guests and questions—me in particular, and mine.

"If you go anywhere," I said,

"on a trip or something, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course, dear," she answered.

I didn't believe her. "She doesn't want me," I told Jeff.

"Has she ever?"

"She said something about traveling."

"She's got a right," and the following week when I phoned and Mama did not answer, Jeff said, "Well, OK, maybe she's off on one of those trips she was talking about."

"She promised to tell me about it first."

"You didn't believe her, did you?"

"No," I said. I also didn't believe she'd take off on a trip without Papa to hold her hand and make all the arrangements and call her "Little Bit." Not Mama without Papa.

"Why not?" said Jeff. "She fired the housekeeper and gardener without your father. She took driving lessons and grabbed herself a chauffeur without him . . ."

I felt a chill step down my spine.

I called again late that night and in the morning, and then I packed and was on my way.

"Aren't you kind of jumping the gun?" asked Jeff. "Look, if you're worried, phone one of the neighbors . . ." (One of the neighbors, hah!)

Mama's house, pseudo-Spanish, built during that fancy time when they put a fat little towerlike appendage on one corner that always reminded me of an obscene tumor, perches on a hillside between tall, vine-covered walls. The lot extends from one street to the other, with neighbors on each side and above, but Mama never knew a single one of them, and that was one thing that worried me. She could fall flat on her stilt heels and die among her souvenirs without a soul to know.

It was windy dusk when I arrived at the house. The town below looked like a bowl of diamonds, the houses on the hill were cheerfully lighted. I parked in the driveway on the street above, nosed close to the garage door, which I tried to open and found locked.

I could see no light from the back of the house as I walked down the cement steps to the yard. I thought of Longfellow's lines: "The twilight is sad and cloudy, The wind blows wild and free . . ."

I tried the back door, then banged on it, calling, "Mama. It's me, Margaret." I went around the house, peering in windows be-

tween the draperies, through outside dusk into inside gloom. *Dark as a tomb in there,* I thought, shuddering, wishing I had not thought in cliché. I ran then, stumbling on the uneven flagstone path, thinking of Mama in her ridiculous tall heels, and tore up the front steps. No light.

I banged the knocker, lifted the doormat, felt along the top of the ornate door—but Mama, of course, was not the type to hide extra keys under mats or above doors as she was not the type to offer an extra key to her very own daughter in case of emergency. I became suddenly furiously angry with Mama, with her immaturity, her secrecies and silly little vanities as I stood helpless before her closed door while she might be dying inside—or dead.

Then I remembered a trick I had read about and rummaged in my bag for a plastic credit card, ran it down the crack of the door, heard a click, turned the knob, opened the door and called out, "Mama."

I felt along the wall, found the switch and turned on the lights. The hall looked different. "Mama," I called. I left the front door open behind me and walked hesitantly to the dark livingroom, flicked the switch, bringing several lamps alight. "Mama," I called again loudly. "Are you in here?"

Nothing.

The livingroom looked different too.

Of course, the whole house seemed to be different without Mama fluttering among her treasures, and tapping those silly heels on hardwood between Persian rugs. I stood there yelling, "Mama," like an idiot, my hand still on the wall switch when I thought, *Well now, this is not finding Mama;* and I walked determinedly to the sitting room, switching on lights; to the dining room, flashing on the chandelier; then to the kitchen, turning on the overhead lights—two bedrooms, two baths, the desk lamp in the study.

The house was ablaze and empty except for me, quiet except for the sound of the wind outside and that damn line came back to haunt me: "The wind blows wild—" when the front door slammed, sending me at a dead run through all the alien rooms to wrench it open again.

It must have been the wind. It really must have been the wind. I looked for the bust, a bronze that had always stood in the hallway, to prop the door open—but the bust was not there, nor the pedestal on which it had always stood. *That* was what was different about

the hall as I remembered it!

I tore out then, slammed the door behind me, raced down the stairs and along the flagstone path around the house, up the steps and into my car. Dark now, I could see the shafts of light I had left shining from Mama's windows down below. The houses across the street above looked warmly bright. The trees whipped in the wind, and diamonds flickered in the town bowl.

I drove down the hill, found a motel, registered and phoned home. Of course there was no answer. I glanced at my watch: 7:30. Jeff and the kids would be out somewhere to dinner—catch any of them turning a hand to frying pan or kettle. So I sat down and cried. Then I went out, got into my car and drove to the police station.

They looked at me, the officer behind the desk and the one leaning on it, as if I were a hysterical female (which I never am, although I was sobbing rather wildly and speaking in an uneven voice), and orated from the heights of their Male and Official Authority, explaining, as if to a child, that I had broken and entered (no matter that I was a daughter), that my mother was an adult (which I questioned) and if she chose to be absent it was strictly her business, certainly not theirs.

I sneered through my tears and raced out, burning rubber as I left to return to the motel. Those officers must have shaken their heads as they debated whether or not to tag me on a speeding charge.

Then I called home again. Thankfully, the family now had its stomach full and Jeff was available for talking—listening rather, which he does rather poorly, being an ad-man who always has to have the triple word. "She isn't home?" he said. "Well, like I told you, she probably took off on one of those trips she's been talking about . . . *You didn't look under the beds?* Oh, for Pete's sake . . . No, I will not drive down there to help you look under the beds. I've got a meeting tomorrow . . . Of course the police can't do anything. If you suspect foul play, get some evidence and then they can help you. But my advice is, go turn off those damned lights and come on home and wait for word from your mother . . ." So I sneered over the phone and hung up.

After a restless night on a motel mattress made for people who need to sleep on boards, I had a sketchy breakfast and drove on up to Mama's. I peered through the windows as I walked around the house, and by cupping my hands,

I could see the faint glow of electric bulbs through the faint light of day in shadowed rooms.

The street was quiet except for a boy cycling toward the high school two blocks away. I waited until he had passed before I got out my credit card.

I switched off the hall light and left the door open. The Santa Anas had blown themselves out so that it *should* stay that way. I investigated the rooms, turning off lights, opening draperies wide, looking under beds, into closets and cabinets, searching everywhere except the basement, and I suddenly thought of that!

It was a half-basement, built under the part of the house on the slope, with nothing down there but a furnace, some stored boxes, a couple of trunks and several pieces of luggage. The basement stairs led down from the kitchen, the door secured by a slide bolt. I switched on the light at the top of the stairs and leaned over the wooden banister. The low-wattage naked bulb lit the basement dimly, leaving the corners in shadow. I put one foot on the second step, then backed up hurriedly, slammed the door shut and shot the bolt. There was no body down there, no shadow large enough in that small space to hide a body unless, of course, one were to consider the dark pocket under the stairway—but I would not consider it, not for a minute!

I went back to the front hall to make sure the door was still open with the sun streaming in. It was then that I saw the shadow of the pedestal, a very faint shadow against the delicate scenic wallpaper—a blurred outline seen from only a certain position to mark where the marble pedestal and bronze bust had stood for so many years. I turned icy in the warm sun of the hall and wrapped my arms around myself. This house had always seemed cold even in the smothering atmosphere of too many things—too, too many things—and now I knew what was wrong, what was different. Some of these things were missing!

I went through the house again, this time trying to remember what my eyes had been accustomed to all my life, to particularize objects that should be there and now were not: a vase, an urn, a figurine, of Wedgwood, cloisonné, Dresden; jewel boxes, cut crystal . . . I don't know that Mama truly loved them, but they were her backdrop, a part of her image, tinkling-voiced conversational pieces, prized for their rarity, for they were her vanity.

She would not, willingly, be separated from them!

I ran, then, for the front hall and the telephone. I yanked open the drawer of the stand. The telephone directory lay there, open, to the yellow pages, headed on the left, AMBULANCE-ANSWERING, on the right, ANSWERING-ANTIQUES. I held the place with the flat of my hand while I searched for Mr. Merrick's office number.

I dialed and asked him questions. Did Mama need money? Had she asked him for extra funds?

The questions caused him to rise defensively belligerent in justification of his position as trustee and executor, explaining the duties of his office in wordy righteous condescension. Mama, according to the terms of the will and the trust account, had been allotted a generous monthly income. Should she desire additional funds, she needed only to apprise Mr. Merrick of her wants and amount, a stipulation set down for the purpose of protection—*her* protection. Mr. Merrick's already high voice rose with the outrage of a man whose veracity and honor has been viciously attacked.

I finally said, "Oh, hell," and hung up.

Then I returned the directory to its original position, open at the yellow pages, and ran my finger down the three antique dealers listed under ANTIQUES. The sun had reached its eleven o'clock position so that it shone through the open front door directly onto a thumbnail crease under the Main Street address of Truesdell's Treasure Trove. I closed the directory, shut the front door and climbed the steps to my car up above.

The Treasure Trove turned out to be an elegantly unobtrusive slot between a cutesy gift shop and a brazen furniture store. I found a parking place, walked inside and was stopped dead by the bronze bust atop the marble pedestal so familiar to me in these very unfamiliar surroundings. The proprietor (probably Mr. Truesdell) advanced upon me, rubbing his hands together, murmuring greetings. I waved him off as I wandered through his trove of treasures, noting here and there remembered objects. Then I turned and asked how he had acquired my mother's belongings.

After a first shocked silence, followed by guarded argument, Mr. Truesdell blinked his eyes and swallowed his alarm as he told me about the man of just two days ago who brought to his shop a car full of art objects. "Young, not yet thirty, about five-feet-ten, slim. Can't remember whether he was

clean-shaven or not. Curly brown hair, sideburns. Well-dressed. Name? Oh, no, I didn't get his name. It was a cash transaction." He looked at me with despair as he added, "His knowledge of antiques seemed to be fairly extensive, so why would I think he didn't belong to those treasures he brought, especially since he brought them in that big old Cadillac?"

Why indeed, I thought, remembering Mama's ever-constant tinkling-voiced descriptions over the objects that formed her backdrop and made her image—remembering too, with startling abruptness, the big old Cadillac she set out to learn to drive . . .

I was out of the shop and into my own car, edging my way from the parking spot, knowing I should seek a telephone directory to look up the driving schools in town when I saw the sign: ADULT DRIVER EDUCATION, and swung into the parking lot.

It was noon, and the girl in the office was eating her lunch from a brown paper bag. She stuffed the bag into a bottom drawer and rose when I asked my questions about Mama.

"What was that name again?" she asked. "Mrs. Mossby? Mrs. Veronica Mossby?" and drew out an account book from under the counter. "Yes," she said, "she did take our driving course," and looked up. "But she didn't finish. Many of them don't. You see, most of the students we get are older women just learning to drive, like widows and stuff who've always had someone to get them around and now they don't."

I nodded.

"Well, they cop out. They decide they'll use their legs after all—take taxis . . ."

"Or get someone else to do their driving for them," I said.

"Right."

"Who taught her?" I asked.

The girl's finger traveled. "That was the new man. His name was Ralph . . ."

My heart began to beat hard and fast against my chest.

"Ralph Overholst. He walked in here with some good references from up north at a time Mr. Barnard needed another instructor, so he put him on. He wasn't here long, couple of months, then he just didn't show one day . . ."

"And that was?"

"About a month ago. No, month and a half. Same time Mrs. Mossby phoned and said she decided not to take any more lessons . . ." She looked up, startled. "Hey, is that why . . . ?"

"What did he look like?" I asked. "This Ralph Overholst?"

"Oh, let's see. Medium-tall, medium-thin, about thirty, maybe older or younger. Brown hair . . . Why are you asking? Has he done something?" She leaned on the counter, woman-to-woman.

"I don't know," I said.

"They try to be careful here when they hire instructors, check references and stuff, you know?"

I nodded. They probably were careful. However, Mama was not. "Was he clean-shaven?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. They have to be. Mr. Barnard insists on it. Older women don't trust men with beards, that's what he says, and our clientele is mostly older women."

"You told me."

"So Mr. Barnard said he'd have to shave before he came to work."

My hard-beating heart jounced in my chest. "So this Ralph Overholst had a beard when he applied?"

"Hairy! You wouldn't believe."

"Thank you," I said, and ran out to my car.

I stopped at a drugstore and got a small bottle of brandy, then at a lunch counter I picked up a carton of take-out coffee. I drove back to the motel, laced the coffee with brandy and dialed Jeff's office. It was twelve-thirty. He wouldn't go out to lunch for another half hour or so, and I planned to give him something to chew on. "Jeff?" I yelled into the mouthpiece . . . "No, I am not home. I'm still here . . . Yes, I turned off the lights. And looked under the beds . . . Oh, shut up a minute and *listen* . . ." Then I laid it all out for him—Mama's things in the antique shop, the young man in Mama's Cadillac, Ralph Overholst of the Adult Driving place who quit when Mama did, and what did he think of that?

What he thought of it was the weirdly contrived logic of an adman. "For Pete's sake, Margaret," he said impatiently, "your mother probably asked this young man to sell a few useless things for her, then she probably hired him to drive her someplace—on one of those trips she's been talking about . . . Why don't you stop fooling around and come on home?"

I hung up, poured some more brandy in the coffee and drank it down. I thought, for one cynical moment, of the police, discarding the thought immediately with the certain knowledge that they would regard my suspicions with the same cavalier impassion as had Jeff.

I jumped into my car and drove to Mrs. Herter's daughter's house.

Mrs. Herter was there, shoes

off, varicose veins swollen, serving her grandchildren a peanut-butter lunch and hating me for being my mother's daughter.

"Why did she let you go, Mrs. Herter?"

"Because she had that young dude there and you can't tell me any different."

"Young dude?" I asked.

"The way she simpered around him was enough to make anyone sick and him young enough to be her son, maybe young enough to be her grandson . . ."

"About how old?"

"At first, she made a pretense. Well, at first, I guess, he actually was teaching her to drive. He'd come after her on the days I worked there and she'd go trippin' out on those heels of hers to the car he brought in front—you know, the one with two driver's things . . ."

"Dual drive."

"But later, he was teaching her on her own car—and I'll bet that wasn't all he was teaching her either. I found some of his clothes in that other bedroom . . ."

I turned my face away.

"The day she told me she didn't need me anymore, I figured she didn't want me nosing around. She was probably ashamed. If she wasn't, she should have been."

"And that's all she said? That she just didn't need you anymore?"

"She said she could get along without me. Who knows? Maybe *he* was going to do the housework. He was already starting to do the yard work."

"What did he look like?"

"Just young. All young people look alike."

It was one o'clock. I knew a lot now that I had not known this morning, but not enough to know where Mama was and why. Enough only to know that her driving instructor, Ralph Overholst (or one who called himself by the name), a hairy, then clean-shaven man, finally neither, but looking like everybody else, had sold a number of Mama's antiques.

I drove from Mrs. Herter's daughter's house across town and down a street of tiny look-alike houses to the one on the corner where Joe Gomez lived. His truck was not parked in the driveway so I drove on. He was probably out clipping grass and any question-and-answer game I might attempt to play with Mrs. Gomez would come out pure Spanish, which I cannot understand.

I turned toward the hills.

Mama's street and the one above was as quietly austere, as uncommunicatively introverted as always. I nosed the car onto the slanted driveway but short of the

garage door. Then I opened the trunk of the car and rummaged around and found what I think is called a tire iron. The garage door was locked with a padlock. I pushed the end of the tire iron in behind the padlocked bolt and pulled. I heard the groan of old, termite-eaten wood as the bolt broke through. I pulled open the door onto an empty garage. Neat and empty. Tools hung on pegboards, waxes, polishes neatly capped and lined up on the work bench, chamois in a basket.

I put the tire iron back into my trunk and slammed it shut. I walked down the cement steps into the yard below and noticed now that it looked better than it ever had during all those years Joe Gomez had taken care of it—more formally pruned, clipped and manicured, the flagstones swept and edged—as if whoever was doing it was either taking pride or making mileage.

Just as I reached the front of the house, the mail truck was moving away from the box down at the curbing. I had forgotten about the mail! I ran down the front steps, opened the box and drew out a couple of bills—one, the electric bill postmarked the day before, probably today's delivery—the other, a gas bill postmarked the day before that, yesterday's delivery. The precanceled Occupant mail carried no date, but an envelope addressed to Mama from a local travel agency showed a postmark of three days ago. I tore it open upon brochures for "Romantic Hawaii," climbed the front steps, inserted my credit card and let myself in the house.

I left the door open, put the mail on the telephone stand, opened the drawer, looked up the number of the travel agency and dialed.

"Why, yes," the sweet young voice answered my question, "that was in reply to a telephone request from Mrs. Mossby. The request?" She seemed to be consulting some notes. "Why, it was the 25th, three days ago, the same day I sent out the brochures. She said she and her fiancé—I believe that's who she said—would want to look them over before making a decision."

"Thank you," I said.

"Well, would Mrs. Mossby . . . ?" she began, and I said, "I'm afraid not. Oh, I am very afraid not . . ." My throat closing, I hung up.

Mama had sat here three days ago, girlishly giddy, apparently alive and well, and made her telephone call—her fateful call, of that I was sure. It was all beginning to come together. I thought

of those personal jigsaw puzzles so popular about ten years ago—Jeff had the account of the game company that manufactured them, and he was enthusiastic—so the company superimposed photographs and mounted them of each of the kids and cut them into jigsaw puzzles, big pieces for small fingers to put together, and Jeff brought them home, watching the kids with an adman's perceptive frown and got the surprise of his life. Steve, four, slapped his together in nothing flat and screamed in terror at all the cracks in his face. Carolyn, two, managed to get her hair and part of her face locked in, then abandoned the project, which was exactly the position I was in at that moment. There was a big hole in Mama's personal jigsaw puzzle and I didn't want to find those remaining pieces.

A sudden gust of hot wind swung the door to shadow the hall. The Santa Anas were back. I opened the door wide again, took the telephone book and wedged it, open to the yellow ANTIQUE section, under the door. I stood there a moment, looking out and across the street at one of the few orange groves left in town. There was no one over there to see anything over here. Nor was there anyone on either side to see anything between the tall, vine-covered walls. I felt a little sick.

It was almost two o'clock. *Food,* I thought. I needed food; the brandy sloshing around in my stomach was making tidal waves.

I went into the kitchen. The sun, slanting between fluffy curtains, was September hot, Santa Ana dry, the kitchen shone. *Then* I noticed its shine, not ordinary kitchen sunshine, but scrubbed bright, fussy neat, nothing left on the counter tops, nothing in the polished sink. Mama, now, Mama tended to be careless, as would be expected from a "Little Bit."

I opened the refrigerator and was surprised at the milk and cream, butter, eggs, cheese on the shelves—a well-stocked refrigerator as Mama's had never been. I poured some milk into a glass and sipped it as I leaned against the sink, looking out the back windows toward the cement steps. The only people who could have seen anything, had there been anything to see, would have been those across the street from the garage up above.

I carried the glass of milk through the house, the carefully dusted, well-polished house, setting it down to open closet doors and cabinet drawers I had opened before. I looked through the guest

room and if some of the "young dude's clothes" had been in "that closet," there wasn't a button, not a thread or piece of lint to be found there now . . . nor any missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But those I had were coming together, forming a part of a picture. I almost knew. I *almost* knew what had happened and why.

The milk had not settled my stomach. I took the glass back to the kitchen and set it on the counter, then I turned to the basement door, unlocked and opened it, bent over the banister and leaped back. The light was on! The light was on down there! I slammed the door and shot the bolt. *Then* I remembered that I, myself, had turned on the light; only this morning, a century ago, I had turned on the light!

The milk threatened to come up, with a chaser of brandy.

I went to open the front door and breathed deep of the hot Santa Ana wind. I knew I had most of the pieces of the puzzle, and my mind picked them out, fitting them loosely together with cracks running through the picture so that Mama came out a frightened half-old, clutching half-young Little Bit, attempting to relive her happily indulgent married life, starting all over again with an identical Hawaiian honeymoon and a doting husband.

The wind was suffocating, so hot and heavy that when I breathed it in it acted like a plug to hold down the milk and brandy, and the horror of the cracked jigsaw puzzle I was putting together.

She must have known she'd have to parry and connive to turn such a young man from instructor to chauffeur to yard-and-houseman to husband-and-lover . . . and quickly, because she was old, and she must have known, deep down, that she was old so she had to hurry—too fast for a man who had fallen into plush surroundings, needing time to plan for the rip-off.

I breathed in the wind that corked the milk and brandy, knowing how it was because I knew Mama, the frolicsome lass, the forever bride, reluctant mother, who wooed a man young enough to be her son. So she had to hold back—and another piece of the puzzle fell into place, cracked across the character. She had to hold back on the money from Mr. Merrick . . . "We can travel," I could hear her tinkling voice. "Oh, we can travel anywhere. All I have to do is ask Mr. Merrick for the money—when the time is right . . ." and I won-

dered if Ralph Whoever knew what she was holding out for while he clipped the lawns and polished furniture, holding out himself.

Mama had to hurry, so she called the travel bureau to ask for the Romantic Hawaiian brochures that she and her fiancé could study.

Three days ago.

I walked out into the wind. It was almost three o'clock and the sun slanted so that it shone against the basement windows on the west and I had to cup my palms around my eyes against the pane as I knelt on the finely clipped grass to see through. It was a moment or so before I could focus my eyes through the shadows of the dimly-lighted basement to the dark well under the staircase and see one pointed toe and stilt heel in the dust-filtered light.

I knelt there screaming, my screams bouncing with the wind against the garden walls, with no one to hear.

I lost the milk and the brandy at last, and fitted the final pieces of puzzle in place satisfactorily.

I walked back into the house and looked at the telephone book that wedged the door open. Then I dialed Operator and asked her to get the police department. "You can come now," I told them. "I have found the body."

The police have a case now—a three-day-old body and two-day-old clues.

I can tell them who to search for—a young man with brown curly hair and the beginning of a new beard (so new that one might not notice or remember), slim, about five-feet-ten, driving a Cadillac or a trade-in for a Cadillac, with some money—not a rip-off bundle, but a slice of panic; a murderer if he pushed Mama down the basement steps, or an accessory if she fell down them on her stiletto heels as she pointed out their Hawaiian Honeymoon luggage.

As soon as I lay it all out on the police, I shall phone Jeff so he can run it halfway up the flagpole and see how it hangs.

Many a man, seeking surcease, unwittingly leaps out of the frying pan into the fire.

The Grass Wasn't Greener

by Patrick O'Keeffe

Sitting alone with a cheap local beer in the Harbour Hotel, Arnold glanced morosely around the fan-cooled barroom. It had not yet begun to fill for the evening; three natives were drinking at a table near the lobby entrance; a pair of German fruit-ship officers in white shirts trimmed with epaulets sat near the street door; Shanghai Sal was chatting at the bar with an American tourist, whose bill in payment for his highball was being scrutinized by the bar-

tender. Naturally, mused Arnold, having read in the local newspaper of the crime wave rampaging through the English-speaking island like one of its seasonal hurricanes—muggings, murders, robberies, counterfeit money—all attributed to smuggled handguns and drugs. Arnold himself could ruefully bear witness to it.

A man suddenly strode in from the lobby, glanced around, and then turned and spoke to Shanghai Sal. She nodded toward Arnold. The newcomer headed straight for his table. "Mr. Arnold, I was told you're a captain looking for a temporary berth," he said grimly, in a Western accent. He was tall and lean, thirty or so, dressed casually in a safari-type jacket and trousers.

Arnold's eyes brightened expectantly. He was still in his twenties, of moderate build, his light hair modishly shaped, wearing a short-sleeved khaki shirt with tan slacks. "Hardly a captain, unless skippering a towboat for ten days qualifies me for the title. I hold a master's license, though, or did until a mugger took a fancy to it."

"I need a man to take over my auxiliary schooner for a short trip out to Buccaneers Cay; back here in around seven days or less."

Arnold glanced at the clock above the bar. "That'd give me a good four-hours' leeway." He was suddenly cautious; Buccaneers Cay was little more than an uninhabited rock roughly twelve-hours' run from the island. "Buccaneers Cay?" he queried.

The stranger pulled out a chair, dropping into it. "Quite legitimate, I assure you. May I inquire, in turn, why you are down here in the West Indies out of a berth?"

"Rotten luck!" growled Arnold. "The big freighter I was second mate of was changed to foreign registry. That got me dumped on the beach in New York. I hung around, out of a ship, getting by on state unemployment benefits. When I heard that a man was wanted to skipper a towboat down to new owners here, I jumped at the chance to get away from the muggings and holdups and hostages and down to a peaceful, tropical isle."

Arnold grimaced in disgust. "And what happened on my first day ashore? I was bopped on the head on my way to this hotel in the dark, after paying off from the towboat, all my payoff money, license, discharges, wristwatch—the whole lousy lot stolen."

"Pretty tough," murmured the other.

Arnold heaved a philosophical

sigh. "Oh, well, luckily I'd left some money in a jacket pocket packed inside my footlocker, which I'd sent on ahead by the hotel porter. There was enough to tide me over for a day or two while I hung around in hope my papers might be recovered before I left; save me the time and trouble of getting them replaced. I'd come down here with the intention of staying over two or three weeks, on the strength of my payoff, and maybe land a steady job and remain. I'm almost broke and have reserved a seat on the midnight plane, which was part of the towboat contract."

The stranger extended his hand across the table. "Arnold, I feel I can confide and trust in you. My name's Tremont, Harvey Tremont." As Arnold grasped his hand, Tremont continued. "I'll be brief and frank. I'm a professional treasure hunter. My researches show that a galleon believed to have two-million-dollars' worth of gold aboard lies sunk somewhere off Buccaneers Cay. Anyone who locates the exact position of the wreck is entitled to file for exclusive salvage rights with the government here. I flew down from Florida a couple of weeks ago, bought the *White Coral,* and equipped her with scuba and other diving gear. I cleared to sail at noon tomorrow—no later."

Tremont compressed his lips, breathing hard. "When I was in the port-captain's office this forenoon getting my clearance, a trading-schooner captain named Manley came in to enter his vessel, the *Sarpedon,* just in from a trip around the islands. During a friendly chat, I told him about my salvage project, foolishly, it seems. I had occasion to go back to the port-captain's office in the afternoon, and I heard that the *Sarpedon* was hurriedly discharging her small amount of cargo and had cleared to sail for Buccaneers Cay at daybreak. I suspected that Manley meant to get there ahead of me and sail back here in quick time with some kind of phony claim."

Tremont glanced up as two naval officers in whites entered from the street and passed the table on the way to the bar. Resuming, Tremont said, "Being a stranger down this way, I kept my thoughts to myself and changed my clearance to midnight tonight. Apparently word of it got to Manley." Tremont paused, as if hesitant to proceed. "Arnold, I said I'd be frank with you. My skipper, an islander, was hauled out of the water about an hour ago, halfway up the wharf from the *White Coral.* There was a

large bruise on his head. The police think he had a seizure of some kind and hit his head when he collapsed on the wharf and toppled off the edge. He'd boasted to me about his good health and he didn't drink. I think it was murder."

"That doesn't sound so good," murmured Arnold.

"Far from it," agreed Tremont. "I had to find a replacement fast. I phoned the port captain at his residence. He said you were about the only man who might be available at such short notice, and told me where to look for you. I came over right away. Arnold," Tremont went on earnestly, "I need you badly. I hired my native skipper at local rate. I'll pay you the American scale, and I'll pay you for seven days or more, even if I locate the galleon in quick time and get back here inside a couple of days to file my claim."

"That won't do me much good if I'm dragged out of the harbor tonight," Arnold demurred.

"I could be wrong and the other was an accident after all, but I wanted to be honest with you. If you join me," Tremont added reassuringly, "you'll have nothing to fear so long as we keep it to our two selves that you're my new skipper. Don't tell anyone. Act as if there'd been no change in your plans. Toward midnight, get a taxi for you and your footlocker, let your remarks in the lobby give the impression that you're leaving for the airport. As soon as you're away from the hotel, tell the driver to take you to the *White Coral,* at the foot of Marcy Lane."

As Arnold sat frowning with indecision, Tremont sweetened his offer. "You said you'd hoped to land a steady job down here. Well, if I locate the galleon, I may be operating around Buccaneers Cay for months in the *White Coral.* The job is yours for as long as you want it, or till something better turns up. Not only that, but I'll give you a percentage of the value of the gold salvaged. It may amount to nothing, or it may be worth thousands."

"That's beginning to sound like a good thing," said Arnold, brightening. "And I like the notion of diving for gold instead of going back to the monotony of life aboard a freighter."

"Then it's a deal." Tremont promptly drew out a wallet, and as he opened it, Arnold saw that it contained both native and American bills. "There's forty dollars on account," Tremont said, sliding two crisp greenbacks across the table, "in case you need a

little extra before we sail." Tremont rose, glancing around. "It's the first time I've been in here, and I don't see anyone who knows me, so no one will draw any conclusions from seeing me talking to you. I've got some more business to attend to now. See you aboard the *White Coral*. Arnold, I'm counting on you, and play it safe by keeping a closed mouth."

Tremont then strode back to the lobby. Arnold eyed the two bills for a moment, and then slipped them into a hip pocket, his wallet lying in unknown hands; they looked genuine enough to him. He finished his beer and then called the waiter and ordered a tall planter's punch; he could afford to splurge a little now.

He lingered over the punch until he felt he could leave without seeming to depart as a result of his talk with Tremont. The only persons present who knew about him were the waiter and the bartender, and Shanghai Sal, who was just coming in from the lobby. She came along to his table, smiling. Shanghai Sal, plumpish and past thirty, with Oriental features and decked out in pink-coral beads, doubled as piano player and hostess in the evenings.

"Mr. Grabow wants to speak to you in the manager's office," she said, in a broad island accent.

Arnold looked at her. "Mr. Grabow?" he queried.

"Mon," she said confidentially, "people say things about him, but he's a good man for you to know. He owns trading schooners and got an interest in this hotel."

"What's his interest in me?"

"He only came in today from a voyage. So I told him about you. Mon, maybe you doan' have to take the plane tonight."

Arnold hated to have to pretend with Shanghai Sal. She had been sympathetic about his mugging, and had promised to pass the word around the waterfront that he could do with a temporary job right away. "Thanks, Sal, maybe I've changed my mind about a job, but I'll go in and see what he has to say."

The manager's office was behind the registration desk, and as Arnold entered, the manager, with a nod to Arnold, rose and went out, leaving an enormously fat man filling an armchair beside the desk, sagging pouches under alive eyes. He plucked a black cigar from his heavy lips and waved at a chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Arnold," he said affably. "Shanghai Sal tells me you're a master mariner looking for a berth."

Arnold remained standing. He

might as well make it short. "Not any longer. I've booked for the midnight plane to New York."

"No problem to cancel it, Arnold. I can use a good man like you for one of my trading schooners. On full pay as from now."

Arnold hesitated. It was a tempting offer, but he was committed to Tremont. "Sorry, Mr. Grabow. I appreciate your offer, but I'm no longer available."

Grabow raised his eyebrows. "That's odd. Shanghai Sal just told me you were hoping something would turn up before midnight."

"That was before I changed my mind."

"Any special reason?"

"A new outlook on the future, you might say."

Grabow became less affable. "It must be a remarkably attractive outlook. I'm sorry I wasted your time, Mr. Arnold. Good evening."

Arnold went straight to his room, which was on the ground floor off the lobby, to avoid being asked awkward questions by Shanghai Sal. She'd unwittingly done him a bad turn by bringing him to Grabow's notice. Grabow was almost sure to send for her and tell her that her time, too, had been wasted. She'd be puzzled. She may know Tremont, even though it was his first time in the hotel, and if she'd heard about the supposed accident to his skipper, she'd remember that Tremont had come into the bar looking for him and, if he evaded her questions, draw the only conclusion. It might then not be long in getting on the waterfront grapevine and reach Manley's ears. Arnold sat on the edge of the bed, uneasy and bemoaning his poor luck. Why hadn't Grabow been the first to come along with his offer?

Presently Arnold rose and, pulling his footlocker from under the bed, began emptying drawers in preparation for packing it. A light crossbreeze coming through the screened window and out through the louvers of the door cooled the room. Several minutes later someone knocked, and Shanghai Sal opened the door. Behind her was a native, wearing a seafarer's visored cloth cap.

"This man came into the bar asking for you," Shanghai Sal said. "He's all excited about something, so I brought him right over."

The man brushed past her into the room. "Mr. Tremont is sick aboard my ship. He came aboard to see my cap'n and suddenly got stomach pains. He get my cap'n to send me up and get you in a taxi. It's waiting outside."

Arnold stared at the man for a moment, wondering how much he

knew, how much Tremont had told him. Aware that Shanghai Sal was within hearing, pulling the door to behind her, he said, "What does he want me for? I only met him less than half an hour ago in the bar for the first time in my life."

"Mon, he doan' say. He tell me go up to Harbour Hotel and get Shanghai Sal to show me who was Arnold. Mon, he got pains. My cap'n tell him he needs a doctor, but he say get you first."

Arnold reached for his hat. Although suddenly stricken ill, Tremont apparently had not revealed anything to this sailor and his captain about having hired him as captain of the *White Coral.* "I suppose I'd better go and see what he wants of me," he growled. "I hope he doesn't make me miss my plane," he added, keeping up the pretense.

The Harbour Hotel was a medium-rate hotel in the waterfront area. During the drive in the warm, starlit night along the street paralleling the wharves, Arnold had little to say to the sailor while within the hearing of the taxi driver. Turning down a short side street, the taxi stopped at the head of a long, dimly lighted wooden wharf. As Arnold and the sailor started walking down it, Arnold saw the two pylon-like masts of a large trading schooner tied up across the end of the wharf. He mused ruefully that he'd just turned down skippering a job like that. Boarding the vessel amidships from the wharf, he wasn't able to see her name, either on the bow or the stern. There was no one in sight on deck. The sailor led him aft to the cabin companionway.

"They're waiting below," he said.

Arnold went down the steps. At the bottom he stared around in the faint light from a single oil lamp, puzzled. There was no one else in the cabin.

He heard footsteps on the deck above, and someone came down the companion. He was a husky islander, in blue shirt and khaki shorts. He stared at Arnold, as if startled, then drew a pistol. With the other hand, he put two fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle. Another man came hurrying down the steps. It was the native sailor.

"How did this Yankee beachcomber manage to sneak aboard?" the other man demanded.

The sailor stared blankly at Arnold. "Mon, he musta done it when I wasn't looking, Cap'n."

"While you were dozing off somewhere, you mean," snapped the captain. "Get Brown—quick!"

As the sailor retreated hastily up the companion, Arnold, furious for having allowed himself to be tricked, said, "The *Sarpedon* and Captain Manley, I suppose."

"Do all the supposing you want to, but don't try anything funny." The captain pointed to a wicker chair with the gun. "Squat there till Brown gets here."

Arnold defiantly remained standing. But for the gun, he would have tackled the heavyset islander, though he was scarcely a match for him. He stood wondering who Brown could be. The cabin was hot and humid, no breeze coming through the small portholes. By the time Brown clumped down the steps in heavy shoes several minutes later, Arnold could almost have wrung out the perspiration from his clothing.

The captain slipped the gun back into a hip pocket of his shorts and turned to Brown, a policeman, appropriately named and in dark tunic and shorts. "I found this Yankee beachcomber about to rob my cabin when I came aboard a little while ago."

"He's lying," fumed Arnold. "I'm no beachcomber. One of his sailors came to my hotel with word that Harvey Tremont was sick here and wanted to see me."

"Constable Brown," scoffed the captain, "this must be the first time you heard that one from a waterfront thief."

Constable Brown eyed Arnold sternly. "Cap'n Manley chawges you with being a thief aboard his vessel. You will have to accompany me to the police station, to answer the chawge. I warn you not to resist arrest."

Arnold saw that further protest would be a waste of breath; Constable Brown was evidently on the waterfront beat, and he and Captain Manley were well-known to one another; his word weighed little with the pompous policeman. He'd wait until they were in the police station. Tremont, the hotel, the taxi driver, Shanghai Sal—all could prove that he was no beachcomber. Sal would also testify that the sailor had come to the hotel to get him. What puzzled Arnold was what Captain Manley hoped to gain by having him arrested on a charge that could so quickly be proved false.

At the end of a ten-minute walk up the wharf and along to the waterfront police station, Arnold was taken into a large room with high screened windows and ceiling fans. A man in a white shirt sat behind a broad, unpolished mahogany desk, a white tunic bearing large sergeant stripes behind him on a wire hanger. Arnold stood facing him while Constable Brown recited the charge. The sergeant fixed his dark eyes on Arnold.

"Do you still deny the chawge?"

"I most certainly do," replied Arnold hotly. "Do I look like some crummy beachcomber? Check with the Harbour Hotel. Check with Harvey Tremont, who hired me for the *White Coral.* What need had I to go thieving aboard another vessel?"

"Cap'n Manley found you in his cabin."

"Only because he tricked me into coming aboard by sending a sailor to tell me that Tremont was sick on board and wanting to see me urgently."

"Why should Cap'n Manley wish to trick you into going aboard?"

"I'll leave it to Mr. Tremont to answer that when he gets here."

"There was only one man aboard the *Sarpedon* all evening as watchman," put in Captain Manley. "And he doan' go ashore."

The sergeant gazed sternly at Arnold. "Cap'n Manley chawges you with trespassing aboard his vessel with intent to commit theft. You admit to being found in the cabin. You state that you were de-

coyed aboard by a member of the crew. All statements will be investigated in the morning. You will be detained until that time."

Arnold stared at the sergeant in disbelief. "Can't you have my statements checked and verified at once? I'm due to sail aboard the *White Coral* at midnight. It's—it's urgent."

"The matter is held over until morning."

The sergeant pressed a button, and then sent Constable Brown back to his beat along the wharves. Captain Manley left with him. A jailer appeared in response to the pressed button.

"Empty your pockets onto the desk," the sergeant ordered.

Arnold was managing to control his rage. He now saw the purpose of Manley's scheme, and it had succeeded. Manley, familiar with local police procedure, had got him locked up for the night. It was simpler and safer than having him knocked off the wharf, and the end result was every bit as effective.

Arnold began laying the scanty contents of his pockets on the desk—cigarettes, book matches in lieu of the stolen lighter, local coins. When he laid out the small amount of island and American paper currency, the sergeant pounced on the two crisp bills and examined the backs of each one. He evidently knew what to look for.

"These are counterfeit," he said sternly. "You will further be chawged with criminal possession of counterfeit money unless you can prove that they were passed to you by a second individual, whom you must be able to name."

Arnold came close to retorting with immense satisfaction that that too, as far as he was concerned, could wait until morning, but checked himself. According to the local newspaper, the police were desperate to trace the source of counterfeit American currency circulating in the islands and believed smuggled in by trading schooners. This was perhaps an opportunity to bring about his release. He'd fool Manley yet.

"I got them from Harvey Tremont. He'll be sailing at midnight in the *White Coral* if he gets a man in my place. You'll need to move fast. Or must that wait till morning, too?" he added dryly.

The sergeant glanced up at the clock. "Plenty of time," he said stiffly.

The jailer led Arnold to a detention cell. It was one of a row built against the outer concrete wall, the top of which fell short of the ceiling, leaving a narrow, barred opening for ventilation,

and used as a main entrance by the swarm of night bugs swirling around the overhead lights. One cell was already occupied by a native lying in a drunken stupor on the floor. The jailer locked Arnold in the next cell and withdrew.

Arnold sat on the end of the bare bunk board, glancing around unhappily and hoping for a quick release. By putting the finger on Tremont, he was getting word to him that he was in jail, and Tremont would lose little time in doing his utmost to get him out. A wry thought crossed Arnold's troubled mind: what if Tremont were passing the phony twenties?

Through the barred opening came intermittent ship whistles and toots of smaller craft out in the harbor, but Arnold grew deaf to them as time passed and he began worrying because there was no sign of his release. Whatever the police had done about Tremont, if anything, it hadn't got him out of jail. By the time it was what Arnold estimated to be around eleven o'clock, he was resigning himself to a night in the cell.

Suddenly he heard someone coming, and turned and looked through the bars. It was the jailer, with another prisoner. Arnold stared at the prisoner in amazement. It was Captain Manley. Captain Manley scowled at Arnold as he was led past to the next cell, but did not speak. After locking him in, the jailer came and unlocked Arnold's cell.

"The sergeant wants to see you, Mon," he said, and led Arnold back to the big room, where he saw Tremont waiting at the mahogany desk.

"The two counterfeits," Tremont told Arnold when they were back in his hotel room, "were part of a million-dollars' worth of bogus twenties seized in Florida a few months back. One of the ring fled to these islands with a hundred-thousand-dollars' worth. Grabow bought them at a big discount, and Manley passed them in ports of call around the islands. Grabow and Manley have long been suspected of smuggling in the *Sarpedon.* After questioning me, the police figured that the counterfeits were cached aboard the *Sarpedon,* and after the usual customs search on arrival at each port, Manley brought a bundle out of hiding for smuggling ashore, with a few for his own use. The police took me along to charge him with passing two to me, and at the same time made a surprise search. Captain Manley had not long got back from the

police station. They found not only a batch of twenties, but also handguns and cocaine on deck, all ready for being smuggled ashore during the night."

"So it was Manley who passed you the two phonies."

Tremont smiled. "That was the ironic bit. I had to pay a harbor fee in the port-captain's office, and Manley obligingly—or willingly, should I say?—broke a fifty for me. He denied it, but got scared after the police found the guns and the dope, and told everything to help save his skin. He said Grabow got a junkie hanger-on to get my other skipper out of the way. The junkie wasn't available for you, so Grabow suggested Manley substitute for him. Manley balked and said he'd take care of you in his own way. He sent the sailor, who was in on the smuggling, up to find you through Shanghai Sal."

"That fooled me, all right," muttered Arnold. "Who told Grabow and Manley you'd hired me?"

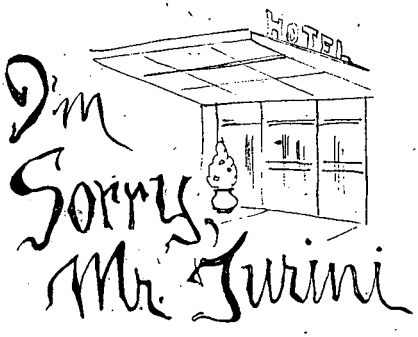
Tremont smiled. "You did. Manley went up to the hotel to see Grabow, who'd gone there to check with the manager on the business done while he was away on the trip in the *Sarpedon*. Manley happened to glance into the bar from the lobby and saw me talking to you. He told Grabow. Grabow sent for Shanghai Sal. She keeps him posted on waterfront news. She told him who you were. He suspected the reason you'd changed your mind about taking a job, and tried to buy you off with a big offer, which Manley said didn't amount to more than bait."

"So people say things about him," murmured Arnold, half to himself. He glanced around at the array of clothing, navigation books, sextant, on bed and chairs. "All that's left to top off the evening is to finish packing and make it aboard by midnight."

"No call for haste now," Tremont said. "Tomorrow forenoon will be soon enough."

"It can't come too soon for me," sighed Arnold. "And I won't be in a hurry to get back to my 'peaceful tropical island.' "

Just when one thinks the heat is off, there may be a new flare-up.



by Stanley Cohen

The room clerk looked down his nose with considerable disdain at Pasqual, his rumpled black suit and his black oily hair. "I'm sorry, Mr. Turini, but we have no reservation for you. And we have no rooms. We're sold out for tonight."

Pasqual's knees sagged. He needed to get into that room and out of sight, quick. A cop could come walking in the door any second and spot the briefcase. "Hey! Don't make jokes," he said to the clerk. "We had this reservation confirmed for weeks. Weeks!" The creep! He was going to try and pull a fast one. He'd blow Harry's whole plan.

"Have you a written confirmation?"

Pasqual slapped frantically at his pockets and finally produced a wrinkled scrap of paper. Harry always remembered everything. "This is what you want. The lady told us we was guaranteed confirmed."

The clerk examined the smudged confirmation slip and then checked it against his bookings. "I'm very sorry, but a mistake has been made. We're overbooked. I'm afraid I can't honor this confirmation. There's nothing I can do."

Pasqual glared at the trim-looking young man in the monogrammed blazer. He would have killed him under other conditions. "You got that reservation over there. We made it a long time ago. It's got to be there, so go look again."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Turini, but I've looked. We don't have a room for

you." The young man showed no signs of being intimidated by Pasqual's menacing tone.

Pasqual changed his approach to that of a plea. "I'm positive it's there. We was confirmed. My friends are coming to meet me here and I gotta be in this hotel."

"I'm afraid I can't help you as far as a room is concerned. We'll be glad to hold a message for your friends."

"You can't pull this." The threat again. "Look, we got reservations and you go check again."

"I've checked, Mr. Turini. There's nothing I can do. Now, could you please step to one side and let the line move forward?"

"Find me a room and we'll make it worth your while, really worth your while. Unnerstand what I mean? But we got to have that room."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Turini."

Pasqual was perspiring heavily. What was he going to do if he couldn't get into the hotel? There was no way to contact Harry. They'd show up looking for him. He couldn't leave a message. Even if it was safe to leave a message, what message could he leave? What was he going to do? Sit there in the lobby with close to five hundred grand in that briefcase? "Look," Pasqual said quietly, "I got to have a room in this hotel. *This* hotel. I'll pay any price, but just find me something. We had a guaranteed confirmed reservation and I'm going to make a little noise around here if I don't get it. Now, do something about it."

"Why don't you speak to our assistant manager?"

"Good. Lemme talk to him. Where's he at?"

The clerk pointed at a door and then pressed a button on the counter. As Pasqual walked toward the door, a slightly older man in a business suit emerged from it.

Pasqual went through the whole thing again with pleas, threats and offers of bribes. The assistant manager walked over and talked quietly with the room clerk for several minutes. They each looked at Pasqual a time or two during their conversation. The assistant manager came back and informed him that they were very sorry but, confirmation slip or not, they had no reservation and no rooms. Pasqual repeated the threat to raise a little hell and the assistant manager said quietly, "Shall I call our security officer, Mr. Turini? Or would you prefer that we just go directly to the police?"

Pasqual looked at the man for a moment without speaking. He wanted to set the briefcase down

and take the guy apart with his bare hands—but what would that do for him? He sponged his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket and turned and walked out of the hotel. He looked around, half-expecting a dozen cops to rush him.

He hurried into another, equally fancy hotel a few doors from the first one, and after standing nervously in the short line, learned from the room clerk that the hotel was sold out and that he didn't think Pasqual would find any rooms on Central Park South because of the boat show in the Coliseum. "I suggest you try farther downtown," the clerk said.

Pasqual walked out onto the street feeling helpless. His instructions were to get into that first hotel room and stay quiet until Harry, Artie and Charlie showed up, but the last guy said go downtown and he figured he'd better do it. He had to do something quick; the briefcase made him nervous. It was an ordinary-looking briefcase like you might see anybody carrying down the street, but he still had to figure that a description of the case had been circulated and any cop might spot it and ask questions.

He reached Seventh Avenue and headed downtown. He walked fast although he knew it wasn't smart. Harry had told him a million times never to rush. It attracts attention. He'd remind himself to slow down, but then he'd gradually speed up again.

He felt hot and steamy. He had been dreaming of getting into that room in that class hotel and really enjoying it, soaking in a fancy shower, stretching out on the bed, waiting for Harry and the boys to bring fresh clothes. He'd never stayed in a class hotel except in Miami a couple times, if he could count that. Had that first clerk turned him down because he looked so bad for such a class hotel?

He had to get the briefcase out of sight. It was going to get spotted. He passed a luggage store and thought about going in and buying a suitcase and putting the little case inside the big one. He could pick out one that looked completely different. Then he remembered he didn't have enough loose cash to buy a suitcase. He was carrying close to half a million dollars and he couldn't afford a lousy valise. Harry had locked the briefcase "to keep it from opening accidentally," and had kept the key. Even if he had the key, you don't just open a case full of half a million bucks in a luggage store.

Harry's plan had gone without a hitch. No rough stuff, no fool-

ishness. Just like it had been laid out to go. The first time in history a job that size had ever been pulled at JFK. They knew where every person was going to be and what they'd be doing the minute they walked into the freight terminal on the fringes of the airport. The money was there, being transferred just like Harry said it would be, and everything worked—the telephone company truck, the uniforms, the toolboxes for carrying the guns, everything.

Harry's planned getaway had clicked too. "There's no way they can check every cab leaving the airport within ninety seconds of the heist," Harry had said. "So we get the money out quick by cab." Charlie was waiting by his taxi with the hood up at the spot Harry'd picked out—a crazy combination underpass and sharp curve. You couldn't see the spot from anywhere around. He had jumped from the moving truck and gotten into the cab. Charlie closed the hood and drove him straight to the hotel and disappeared. He had changed clothes in the taxi while on the way.

"We got to keep doing what they don't expect," Harry had said, "and they won't be looking for a bunch of stickup artists in one of the palaces along Central Park South. So that's where Pasqual goes with the money. And we'll meet there later." With the reservation confirmed, even Harry hadn't figured on the creep behind the counter at the hotel.

Pasqual crossed 57th Street and exchanged looks with the cop directing traffic. Harry had told him a million times never to look one straight in the eye. He had to stop doing it. The cop glanced at the briefcase. Had he already been checked out on the heist? It was less than an hour old but the cop was staring at the briefcase!

Pasqual almost started running but forced himself back into a walk. Unable to resist the urge, he looked around at the cop and saw that he was using his walkie-talkie. No! He had to get that case outa sight! He broke into a run and ran to the next corner, crossed while dodging traffic and ran another block.

He spotted a huge hotel and headed for it. Panting and soaked to the skin, he got into the line at the registration desk only to be faced with the inevitable question: "Do you have a reservation?"

Pasqual returned to the street and looked around. There were more hotels farther down Seventh Avenue toward Times Square. They couldn't all be sold out. He began to think of the briefcase as being festooned with neon lights

that attracted the eyes of the world. Everybody was staring at him, first him and then the case.

Spotting another hotel across Seventh Avenue, he dashed into the street, almost causing a massive pile-up of the frenzied traffic moving toward Times Square. He ignored the glares and raised fists of the hacks and other drivers and hurried to the other side.

He entered the hotel and got into the registration line. Only two people were in front of him, an old lady with purple hair and a businessman, yet the wait seemed endless—and even before he heard the question, he knew it was coming. He could see it in the eyes of the broad handling registrations. "Do you have a confirmed reservation?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Your name?"

"Pasqual Turini."

She checked it out and returned with the look he had come to know so well: the look of a room clerk in a sold-out hotel. "I'm sorry, Mr. Turini." Of course, they were booked up for the night. He considered going into the whole "You musta made a mistake" routine, but he could tell she was a tough broad and it was a waste of time.

He turned and walked toward the front of the lobby and the street. As he approached the door, a police car stopped directly across the street and four of the boys in blue climbed out of it. They stood in a group for a moment and talked. Then they fanned out, two going down Seventh and one up Seventh. The fourth cop stood on the curb, waiting for traffic to break so he could cross toward the hotel.

Pasqual turned quickly and went over to the bell captain. "You got a checkroom?"

"Yeah, sure." The captain pulled a check from under his counter and scribbled something on it. He tore it in half and tied half to the handle of the briefcase.

Pasqual took a deep breath and then mopped his face with his sleeve. "I'll pick it up later," he said. "Who needs to be lugging that thing around town? You know what I mean?"

"Pick it up any time. Just bring the claim check."

Pasqual glanced at the door leading out to Seventh Avenue. "Say, you got a way to get through here to Broadway?"

"Sure." The bell captain pointed at a door in the corner of the lobby. "Through there, out through the parking garage, turn right. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." Without looking back, Pasqual headed for the door.

"Hey, you forgot your claim check," the captain said, pointing at the scrap of paper on the counter.

Pasqual stopped and almost collapsed. What if he had left without it? He rushed back over, grabbed it and squeezed it in his hand. He pocketed it as he went out.

Pasqual walked down Broadway feeling more relaxed and much less conspicuous. The case was safely out of sight. They could pick it up any time. Now he had to think where to go and where not to go. What would Harry tell him to do if he were there? He'd better not go to his own place. No way was that safe. Still, it had to be someplace Harry would guess. Rosie's. His sister Rosie's. Her little kid loved him. Had to go somewhere and wait. The whole escape plan was busted, anyway. Harry would have to put together a new one—and Harry would think to call Rosie's.

He looked around him at the crowds. Times Square. What a zoo! He thought about the money and then the claim check. What if he were stopped and searched? He reached in his pocket and pulled out the claim check and looked at it. A half-million bucks! He turned it over and fumbled it and dropped it. A breeze carried it several feet and he chased it, covering it finally with his foot, not far from a sewer. He picked it up carefully and slid it into the heel of his shoe. When they frisk a guy, they don't look in his shoes. He glanced around. A cop was watching him and chuckling. Pasqual walked another block and then ducked down the steps into the subway.

Pasqual was sitting by the phone at Rosie's when Harry's call finally came. He could sense Harry's frustration when he described what happened at the first hotel, but it didn't seem to matter too much since the plan to get rid of the telephone truck had worked so very smoothly. They had avoided the possible chase and there had been no need for the car switch in the parking garage or the overnight delay in the fancy hotel before leaving the city. All they had to do was get in the car and go. Then Pasqual told Harry about the briefcase.

After sweating a moment of silence, Pasqual thought Harry was going to come through the phone at him. He tried to explain but couldn't make himself heard over Harry's rage. He listened painfully until Harry got it all out. Then, on the basis that what was done was done, Harry told him they'd

take him by the hotel and let him pick up the case. After that, they'd be on their way. Things had gone well and still looked pretty clean, but Harry made it quietly clear what he should expect if for any reason, ANY reason, they didn't get that money back. Pasqual shuddered and clutched the claim check tightly.

Pasqual walked into the hotel and found the place a mess. The floor was wet and there was a burnt smell everywhere. He went over to the night-shift bell captain and handed him the claim check.

"See da manager," the man said, handing it back.

Pasqual felt the blood drain from his face. He grabbed the bell captain by the lapels of his jacket. "Do what? No! Gimme the case!"

"See da manager," the captain repeated, brushing his hands away.

"Here's the check, gimme the case," Pasqual said quickly.

"See da manager."

"What for?"

"See da manager, he'll take care o'ya."

Pasqual looked around, expecting to see himself surrounded by cops with their guns drawn. Instead, everything looked perfectly quiet, except for the mess and the smell. He walked uncertainly over to the registration desk and asked for the manager.

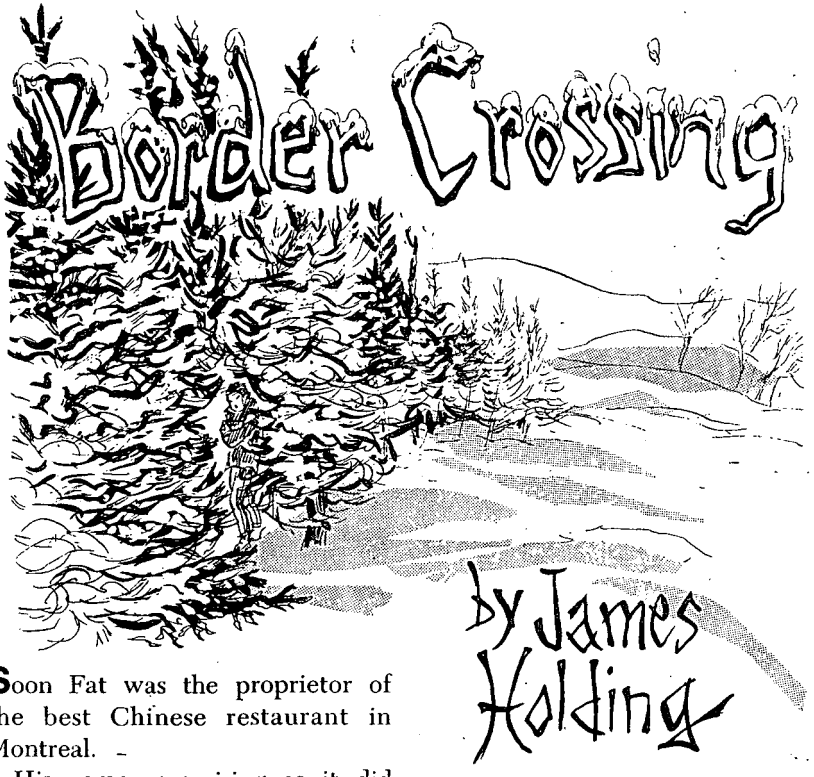
A new broad behind the desk went to an open door and spoke to someone inside the room. A man came out of the office. He approached Pasqual, and seeing the claim check in his hand, said, "You had something in our checkroom prior to five this afternoon?"

Pasqual looked around again, still expecting anything. Finally he said, "Yeah."

The manager took the check out of his hand and examined it. Then he walked around the counter and into his office. He returned in a moment carrying a white sheet of paper, a printed form. "We had a fire in our checkroom this afternoon," he said, "and everything in there was completely destroyed. However, we do have insurance to cover the damage and if you'll fill out this form and carefully itemize your losses, estimating values of each item, we will file the claim with our underwriter and you should be able to recover . . ."

Pasqual turned and glanced toward the front of the hotel and Seventh Avenue where Harry and Artie and Charlie were waiting. Then he dashed for the door in the corner of the lobby that led to the parking garage and Broadway.

Like the wind from the east, one's course may veer sharply from the norm.



Soon Fat was the proprietor of the best Chinese restaurant in Montreal.

His name, promising as it did the early correction of his own natural emaciation, gave rise, of course, to a certain amount of hilarity among his English-speaking patrons. Furthermore, the name (which is no more hilarious to a Chinese than the name Smith is to an American) was a definite business asset, an advertising come-on. What diner, with a sense of humor and a weight problem, could resist coming to Soon Fat's restau-

rant to feast on delicious Chinese food that was actually more likely to make him soon thin than soon fat?

Soon Fat was Canadian-born, fluent in both English and French, the shrewd son of immigrant parents, now dead, and a leader in Montreal's Chinese community. All this was generally known. What was not generally known, however, was Soon Fat's deep personal interest in improving the unhappy lot of certain of his fellow Orientals.

Ah Lee was one such case.

At 10:15 on a Thursday evening in January—a blustery, overcast night of penetrating cold outdoors—Ah Lee sat alone over a pot of tea at an inconspicuous table at the rear of Soon Fat's restaurant. He watched with anxious eyes the comings and goings of Soon Fat about his host's duties: welcoming customers, chatting with habitués, urging waitresses to faster service, taking drink orders, popping in and out of the swinging kitchen doors on mysterious errands.

At length, when one of Soon Fat's passages across his dining room brought him close to his table, Ah Lee seized the opportunity to address him shyly. "The wind from the east veers into the south," he said in an uncertain voice, speaking in the Cantonese dialect.

Soon Fat raised his eyebrows in surprise and stopped beside Ah Lee. "Did you say something to me, young man?" he asked in English. "Something about the east wind?"

Ah Lee regarded Soon Fat in bewilderment and said nothing. His mouth hung open.

Soon Fat sat down in the other chair at Ah Lee's table and smiled affably at him as though he had known him all his life. He repeated his question, this time in French. "Did you say something to me, young man? Something about the east wind?"

Again he got the blank look, slowly changing to one of acute anxiety. Ah Lee then revealed in Cantonese the reason for his bewilderment. "Do you not understand our mother tongue?" he asked.

Soon Fat smiled with his lips held tightly together. "Of course," he said easily, in Cantonese. "But it is evident that you do not understand English or French."

"Oh!" Ah Lee's features rearranged themselves into an expression of relief. "That is true, sir."

"OK. Now that we have that settled, what's all this business about the east wind veering into the

south?" Soon Fat asked him.

"Kai San in Hong Kong—" Ah Lee began.

Soon Fat held up a slender hand. "No names, please," he said, smiling as though cracking a joke with Ah Lee. He was a very careful man. Who knew when one of his late customers might grow curious about a serious conversation between Soon Fat and a strange Chinese?

"Very well, sir. I was told to introduce myself to you by using that phrase."

"You want my help, eh?"

Ah Lee looked at his hands and saw they were trembling. He clasped them together on the tablecloth to stop their quivering. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "Yes, sir. I need your help. Please."

Speaking rapidly in a voice inaudible ten feet away, Soon Fat said, "All right. Finish your tea, pay your check, and go outside like a regular customer leaving. Understood? Then walk left around the nearest corner to the mouth of an alley that runs behind this building. Go up the alley till you come to the back of this restaurant. You'll know it by a fan in the back wall of my kitchen. Come into the kitchen through the rear door, mount the staircase to your right, go into the room at the top of the staircase to your left. It is my office. Wait there in the dark for me. I will not be long."

Ah Lee said, "What of your chefs?"

"They're my nephews. They see nothing. Take care, however, that no one else sees where you go." Soon Fat stood up and hurried to the front of the restaurant to say good night to a group of departing diners.

Ah Lee finished his pot of tea, feeling relief and, at last, genuine hope. When he rose from his table, he left no tip for his waitress. Walking to the cashier's desk

to pay his check, his worn sandals, with one thong broken, scuffed along the tile floor. He wore faded jeans with ragged bottoms, and under his open black Windbreaker, a soiled white T-shirt obviously turned inside out to present its cleaner side.

He paid for his tea and left the restaurant, following Soon Fat's instructions exactly. He negotiated the corner, found the alley mouth, slipped into it as quietly as possible. When he located the rear of Soon Fat's restaurant by the whirring of the large fan set into the back wall of the kitchen, he crouched in the shadow of stacked garbage cans for a time, listening and watching intently for signs that he was observed. After five minutes, he decided he was not.

The restaurant's rear door was unlocked. He opened it quietly, stepped inside, and looked somewhat fearfully about him at the spotless stainless-steel kitchen where Soon Fat's excellent cuisine was born. Two young Chinese in high white hats were chatting by the huge electric range. They raised their eyes and looked at him without interest, then went back to their animated conversation. Ah Lee thought he heard several girls' names mentioned amid laughter.

He looked to his right. A closed door was there. Ah Lee took two rapid steps, twisted the doorknob, pulled the door open and eeled through it. When he closed it behind him he found himself in impenetrable darkness.

He stretched out his hands before him, stooping, and felt the risers of a flight of stairs. Straightening, he found a stair rail and mounted the steps, guiding himself by the banister under his hand. The stairs were steep. When the banister ended, he knew he had reached the top. He felt left and discovered door panels. He opened the door and inched through it. He never remembered such darkness. It was like being blind.

He closed the door silently behind him. Three steps into the gloom and his shinbone came in painful contact with what his seeking hands told him was the edge of a straight wooden chair. He sighed gratefully, sank into the chair, put his feet together, and waited patiently for Soon Fat.

Soon Fat must be able to see in the dark like a cat and move as quietly, Ah Lee thought, for although he heard no footsteps on the staircase, heard no door open, felt no movement of air, he suddenly felt Soon Fat's hand on his shoulder. Ah Lee started violently, sucking in his breath.

A chuckle and the hand was withdrawn from his shoulder. Immediately, a rose-colored lamp flashed on behind Ah Lee's back. After the total darkness, the light made him blink, and when his vision cleared, he saw Soon Fat smiling his tight-lipped smile at him from behind a dainty teakwood desk. The smile, Ah Lee was sure, held a hint of malicious pleasure at having startled his guest with that shoulder touch in the dark.

The room was sparsely furnished. Two other straight chairs, like the one on which Ah Lee sat, flanked a crimson sofa on the wall opposite the doorway. These, with the desk, desk chair, three lamps, were the only furniture in the room. Now, however, the shaded lamps showed Ah Lee that the chairs and desk were beautifully embellished by hand-carved basreliefs of horsemen, dragons and demons; that the bases of the lamps looked very much like twelve-hundred-year-old Tang pottery. An oval Chinese rug covered the floor and pleated black draperies masked the walls solidly save for the doorway at the top of the staircase. There wasn't a sign of a window anywhere. The room was comfortably warm, but Ah Lee saw no heating source. A telephone occupied the exact center of Soon Fat's desk top, flanked on one side by an appointment pad, on the other by a ball-point pen in an exquisite white onyx holder.

It was a simple room but rich and dramatic enough to remind Ah Lee forcibly, by contrast, of his own poverty and desperation.

Soon Fat said, "You like it? My office?"

"It is beautiful," said Ah Lee sincerely.

Soon Fat dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "It is private, at least. And I take it you are interested in privacy now?" He giggled.

Ah Lee nodded. "Kai San said you would help me."

Soon Fat bowed deeply, not an easy thing to do when seated behind a desk. "I am at your service. May I know your name?"

"Ah Lee."

"And you want me to help you do what?"

"To get into the United States," Ah Lee said.

"So. Where do you come from?"

"Hong Kong."

"How did you come here?"

"On the *Kowloon Star.* As a deckhand." Ah Lee remembered the long weeks of brutal labor he had put in aboard the *Kowloon Star* before that rusty freighter had finally wallowed its way

across the Gulf of St. Lawrence and nosed into the St. Lawrence River.

"You jumped ship?" Soon Fat asked.

"Yes, sir. Four days ago."

Soon Fat opened a drawer of his desk and withdrew a thin sheaf of newspaper clippings, held together by a paper clip. He leafed through them rapidly. Then, "Here we are," he said. "The *Kowloon Star*. Yes, it docked here Monday." He gave Ah Lee an apologetic look. "I keep these shipping news items purely as a measure of security, you understand."

Ah Lee said with dignity, "I do not lie, sir."

"Perhaps not. But some of my charges do. And I must be very careful." Soon Fat put away his clippings, watching Ah Lee the while with an expression of reprimand on his narrow face. "So for my own protection, Ah Lee, I shall check to see if a Chinese deckhand named Ah Lee was a member of the crew of the *Kowloon Star* . . . and jumped ship here in Montreal last Monday."

Ah Lee was penitent. "I am sorry, sir. I understand you must take precautions."

Soon Fat's good humor was restored at once. "Actually," he said lightly, "my 'help' as you call it, is officially frowned upon. The authorities insist on regarding it as the illegal smuggling of aliens into our great sister country across the border." Soon Fat drew back his lips in a sour grin that gave Ah Lee a glimpse of elegant bone-white false teeth. "Where do you wish to go in the United States?"

"I have two cousins in New York," Ah Lee answered, excitement flushing his cheeks. "They wrote my father asking if I could come to America and live with them. They promise to teach me the American language very quickly . . . so that I can work in their tailor shop. I do not wish to sound conceited, sir, but I am a very good tailor. I worked for eight years at Hallmark Tailors in Kowloon . . ."

"No doubt," Soon Fat said dryly. "Do you mean New York City?"

"Yes, sir."

Soon Fat nodded and made a note on his appointment pad with the ball-point pen. Then he looked up and said suddenly, "How did you learn of Kai San?"

"He is my father's friend," Ah Lee returned simply. "He told my father that you have generously helped many of our countrymen into the United States. And he gave me the phrase about the east wind as a . . . a . . . password to

you." Ah Lee sighed passively.

"I see." Soon Fat chuckled. "I am famous in Hong Kong, eh?" He tapped his fingernails on the top of his desk. "Well, these smuggling tricks, alas, cost money, Ah Lee. Much money."

"I have money," Ah Lee volunteered eagerly, sensing that Soon Fat had now decided to help him. "My life savings, sir. And a little money besides, that my father could spare, now that he is very old."

"How much?" asked Soon Fat bluntly.

Ah Lee opened his mouth to answer, then shut it again out of native caution. "How much is your price?" he countered cautiously.

To his surprise, Soon Fat laughed aloud. "I see you are not the young fool I took you for, Ah Lee."

Ah Lee couldn't help smiling, too. "I meant no offense, sir."

"Do you have twelve hundred dollars?"

Ah Lee gasped at the amount. So much! He temporized. "Hong Kong dollars?"

"Canadian," Soon Fat said evenly.

"It is a fortune!" Ah Lee moaned. "A fortune!"

"Half of it goes to my American colleague in our enterprise," Soon Fat explained peremptorily.

"It is still a great fortune!" Ah Lee mourned, but he began the traditional bargaining eagerly. In the end, they settled on a thousand dollars, the thousand to include the price of Ah Lee's bus ticket to New York City.

Soon Fat watched politely as Ah Lee counted out the Canadian dollars for which he had exchanged his entire store of yen before leaving Hong Kong. Then Soon Fat gathered up the bills, tapped them against the desk top to even their edges. "Return here at midnight tomorrow night," he instructed Ah Lee. "Come in the rear entrance as you did tonight. Make sure you are not observed. And bring your luggage with you. My American colleague will pick you up here and see that you get across the border into Vermont and on your way to New York."

"I shall be here." Ah Lee breathed deeply, scarcely able to believe that his dream might actually come true. "At midnight?"

"Yes. You will be safe until then?"

Ah Lee blushed. "I think so, sir," he said. "I am staying at Madame Turot's." Madame Turot's was an obscure rooming house buried deep in the Chinese section of the city. It was also a bordello.

Soon Fat showed his false teeth

again. "You young men!" he said.

Ah Lee shook his head. "Kai San also recommended Madame's to me. As a rooming house only." He gave a small grin. "I cannot afford the other services offered."

"Well," Soon Fat said, "it is a safe house, at any rate. Until tomorrow night, Ah Lee."

They bowed deeply to each other and Ah Lee took his departure. As he started to descend the staircase to Soon Fat's restaurant kitchen, he heard quite clearly through the door behind him the clicking sound of Soon Fat's telephone as he dialed a number.

At eleven-thirty the following night, Soon Fat was ensconced in his office over the restaurant kitchen. A pot of tea rested at his elbow on top of the teakwood desk. He drank the tea from a small porcelain cup as he talked to his visitor. "You honor me by your presence," he said formally to the man who sat in the straight chair occupied last night by Ah Lee. "I expected one of your sons."

"I might as well handle it myself this time," Roger Bailey said, nursing a shot glass full of bourbon in his rough farmer's hands. "I had to come across to see my sister in the hospital here, anyway."

"She is ill?" asked Soon Fat sympathetically. "How seriously?"

"About to die," Roger Bailey said with a bark of laughter. "The old cow."

Soon Fat did not understand Vermont humor, but he did his best to show he appreciated his guest's lack of sentiment. He put his fingers together like a tent and bowed agreeably. "We get a thousand dollars for this one," Soon Fat said.

The Vermonter wagged his head. "Not bad, Fatso, not bad. That's better than we got out of those two last Christmas, eh?"

Soon Fat assumed a lugubrious expression. "We got a very good price for them, everything considered."

Bailey grinned wolfishly. "It wasn't my fault that the Immigration boys happened to make a check of the area that night," he said, "and that I couldn't pick your two Chinks up as promised after they walked across the border. When I got the tip-off about the border check, it was too late to do anything. No sense risking our operation for a couple of dumb Chinamen."

Soon Fat said softly, "I am sorry what happened to them. They were nice boys."

"So they froze to death waiting for me," Bailey said indifferently. "Tough luck for them, and don't

get sentimental on me!" He took a swallow of his bourbon and changed the subject. "You get cash on the barrelhead?"

Soon Fat reached across his desk, handing Bailey a number of bills. "Certainly. Five hundred dollars for Roger Bailey. Five hundred dollars for Soon Fat." He giggled.

Bailey counted the money carefully, then stuffed it into a pocket. "Easy money, Fatso." he said.

"You anticipate no difficulties this time, then?" Soon Fat's voice held a touch of asperity. He didn't like to be called Fatso.

"Not this time. The word from Immigration is that we'll be safe as houses tonight."

"Where?" asked Soon Fat.

"Derby Line. There's a lot of small, unguarded dirt roads around there. Tonight your boy can walk across the border as easy as a stroll in the park." Bailey made a quick sketch on the back of an envelope, showed it to Soon

Fat. "See this? I'll put him off on this side, pick him up on the other, and get him on a bus in Burlington. No sweat. I'll see him to the bus myself if you like."

"That would be best, I think. He speaks no English."

"He won't need to. I already bought the bus ticket for him." He handed it to Soon Fat. "You tell him to keep his lip buttoned till he gets to New York and nobody'll bother him."

"I'll tell him."

"You better explain to him how it'll work, too. I sure can't tell him anything if he don't understand English."

"I'll explain it all to him."

"When's he due here? I want him on the seven o'clock bus tomorrow morning."

"I instructed him to come here at midnight."

"Ten more minutes," Bailey said, looking at his watch. "How about another shot while we're waiting, Fatso? That's good booze."

It was one minute to midnight when they heard Ah Lee's flapping sandals ascending the steep stairs to Soon Fat's office. There was a timid knock on the door. "Come in," Soon Fat said in Cantonese.

Ah Lee opened the door and came into the office, carrying in one hand the cheap fiberboard suitcase that held all his possessions. He looked even more bedraggled, and wearier and hungrier than the night before. There were dark circles under his eyes, staining the parchment skin.

"Good evening, Ah Lee," Soon Fat said jovially. "You rested well at Madame Turot's, I trust?"

"I could not sleep, sir. I was too happy." Ah Lee's eyes went to Roger Bailey.

"This is the American colleague I mentioned to you," Soon Fat said.

Ah Lee set down his suitcase and bowed to the American. Bailey overflowed the carved chair in which he lounged. He was massive, craggy-featured, dark-haired. His eyes were the color of dishwater and, to Ah Lee, seemed as cold as chips of ice.

Bailey said, "Hi, boy," and drained the small whiskey glass in his hand. "Go on, Fatso," he said to Soon Fat, "tell him."

Soon Fat said, "Listen carefully, Ah Lee. If you want to see New York, you must do exactly as I tell you."

Ah Lee listened attentively while Soon Fat described what was to happen to him. At the end, he smiled nervously and nodded his head. "I understand," he said. "I shall do everything you say."

"Good," said Soon Fat. Then, to Bailey, "He's ready now."

Bailey stood up, towering over Ah Lee's slight figure. He patted Ah Lee on the back with a hand like a ham. "Let's go, boy." He led the way to the door.

Ah Lee picked up his suitcase, tarried long enough to bow deeply to Soon Fat and murmur his thanks, then followed Bailey down the steep steps into the restaurant kitchen. The kitchen was dark, the restaurant closed. There were no chefs now to see Bailey lead Ah Lee through the rear door and out to the alley at the rear.

Fifty feet up the alley, a car was parked without lights. Bailey opened the trunk of this car with a key and stood back. As instructed, Ah Lee climbed into the trunk and curled up on his side, squirming about until he was as comfortable as possible. Bailey tossed his suitcase in after him and shut the trunk lid with a sharp click. Ah Lee was relieved to find that Soon Fat had told him the truth about the car trunk. The lid was sprung on one side, so that even when closed and locked, there was a half inch of space through which plenty of air could enter to prevent Ah Lee from suffocating.

For two hours, that seemed much longer, Ah Lee lay in the trunk of Bailey's car, listening to the whir and hum of the tires as they rolled over what must have been a well-paved highway, clear of snow. At first, there were half a dozen stops; Ah Lee concluded they occurred at traffic lights as Bailey made his way out of the city. After that the journey was uninterrupted until a sudden slowing, a sharp turn to the right, and a teeth-rattling jouncing over a very rough surface, indicated that the first half of his ordeal was approaching its end.

A few minutes later, the car came to a halt. Ah Lee, straining his ears, heard Bailey open his door and get out. He left the engine running. In a moment, a key rattled in the trunk lock and the lid was lifted. Bailey's massive head and shoulders loomed against a sky studded with scattered clouds and patches of stars.

"Out," Bailey said, gesturing to show Ah Lee his meaning. Ah Lee swung his legs over the edge of the trunk and stood up, stretching the cramps out of his muscles. He noticed the car was without lights. There was an inch-deep film of snow on the ground.

Ah Lee reached into the trunk and retrieved his suitcase. Then he looked around him. They were on the edge of a wide grove of trees.

Dimly in the starlight, Ah Lee could make out the single set of car tracks on the old logging road by which Bailey had reached this spot. He nodded enthusiastically at Bailey and said with a lift in his voice, "Soon Fat described this place to me," before he remembered that Bailey wouldn't understand him.

Soon Fat had described the grove of trees, the old logging track, the high hills that loomed far off to his right across the snow. Soon Fat had also explained to him very carefully that the Canadian-United States border ran right through that grove of trees and tonight it would be blessedly free of border guards. Ah Lee breathed deeply of the icy air and pulled his Windbreaker higher around his neck. He was shivering, as much from excitement as from the cold.

Bailey tapped him on the chest to get his attention, then pointed a forefinger like a dollar cigar toward the south, through the trees. "There," he said. "That way. Walk. You savvy?" He watched Ah Lee's face to make sure he understood. Ah Lee nodded again, picked up his suitcase and started to walk through the trees. They smelled deliciously fragrant, besides helping to temper the sharp wind that was trying to knife through his thin Windbreaker.

Bailey got back behind the wheel of his car and still without lights, backed, turned, and drove away up the old road to the north.

Ah Lee watched him go. He was not disturbed. Soon Fat had told him why Bailey would leave him alone for a time: Bailey would cross the border boldly and innocently, as an American citizen should, through a Customs station on a main road nearby, then double back to pick up Ah Lee at the southern edge of the grove of trees—the Vermont edge, Ah Lee thought exultantly. Soon Fat had instructed him to wait there patiently, to stay under the trees, to avoid the dirt road that bordered the grove until Bailey came to fetch him.

Ah Lee followed these instructions to the letter. He stayed inside the edge of the woods, walking up and down, flapping his arms, stamping his feet to keep his blood circulating in the piercing cold. The time passed quickly now. Ah Lee knew the worst was over.

Bailey's car appeared on the dirt road beside the woods just as the rising sun was beginning to dissipate the darkness under the trees where Ah Lee waited. Its

headlights seemed pale and washed-out in the half-light of dawn. Bailey made a careful U-turn on the inch of snow, pulled to the roadside facing west, stopped, and gave a triple tap on his horn. At the signal Ah Lee picked up his suitcase and walked out from under the trees.

Less than an hour later, they came into the outskirts of an awakening Burlington. Bailey drove by back streets to the bus station, pulled up across from the terminal, pointed to it and said, "New York. Understand? New York."

Ah Lee pulled from his pocket the bus ticket Soon Fat had given him with his instructions. "New York," he said, attempting to say the words the way Bailey said them.

Bailey grunted and motioned for him to get out of the car. When he was on the sidewalk, clutching his suitcase, Bailey pulled the car door shut and drove away without a backward glance.

Ah Lee walked into the bus terminal. He went over to the public telephone booth in the corner near the ticket office, closed himself in, and dialed a number.

A woman answered.

"Is Mr. Lehy there?" Ah Lee asked.

"I'll ring him. Hold on, please."

In a moment, a booming bass voice came over the wire. "Yeah?" it bellowed.

"Harry?" Ah Lee asked, although he didn't need to. He recognized that stentorian shout.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Who is this?"

"Lee."

"Lee who?"

"Ah Lee Cheung."

"Oh. That Lee. Hi, Lee. You been gone so long I almost forgot about you."

"Nearly two months."

"Well, well. And how are things with you, Lee?"

"Couldn't be better. Although I'd like a hamburger and a milk shake. I'm sick and tired of fried rice and tea."

"No substance to it," Harry said, chuckling. "I know. Where are you now?"

"Bus station in Burlington. I've just been smuggled into Vermont from Canada, Harry."

"I'll be damned! Where'd you cross the border?"

"Derby Line. There wasn't a guard within a thousand miles, far as I could tell."

"That's a hell of a place there, Lee, with all those back roads and all. It's a bitch to cover."

"Maybe I can give you some information that'll make it easier,"

Ah Lee said, smiling to himself.

"I'd sure appreciate that."

"Start with Hong Kong. A man named Kai San Sung, a curio dealer, gave me the Canadian contact—a guy named Soon Fat in Montreal. Runs a Chinese restaurant. A smooth specimen. Charged me a thousand bucks for the trip across."

"Nice friendly feller, hey?" Harry shouted in his booming voice.

"Right. But a pussycat compared to the tiger who brought me over—a Vermonter named Roger Bailey. Owns a 1971 Skylark, Vermont license number 10-233M. Six-feet-three, heavyset, colorless eyes, dark hair, drinks bourbon straight, has a sister in a hospital in Montreal, I think, and at least two sons who help him smuggle aliens across the border after Soon Fat in Montreal sets them up." Ah Lee paused. "You getting this down?"

"I got a memory like a steel trap, Lee, you know that. Anyway, I want a written report from *you* on all this."

"Okay."

"How'd you find out all this stuff?" Harry asked. "Brainwash the guy? All you Chinese go in for that, they tell me."

Ah Lee laughed. "I showed up a little early last night at my rendezvous with Soon Fat and Bailey. Hung around a back alley till I saw Bailey go into Soon Fat's through the back door. Followed him in and eavesdropped through the door of the room where I was told to meet them. Nothing to it, Harry. But I sure want you to lay it on those people good."

Harry yelled, "I intend to, Lee, I intend to! Can't touch Kai San . . . was that his name? . . . or Soon Fat in Montreal, of course."

"Give Ottawa the Soon Fat information, Harry. Maybe they will reason with him."

"That's a thought. On the other hand, I can come down on this Roger Bailey myself, him being an American citizen and all."

"Come down on him hard," Ah Lee said. "Hard, Harry."

"Some special reason?"

"You could say so. Murder one. Or manslaughter at the least, on top of the smuggling rap. Remember the two Chinese boys you found frozen to death near North Troy last winter?"

"I remember."

"Bailey sent them across, but he didn't bother to pick them up on this side. Just let them freeze to death."

"Well, well." Harry's great voice all at once held a thread of iron. "You find out why?"

"He knew beforehand you were

going to be patrolling the North Troy area that night, Harry. So after he sent the boys walking across the line, he just went home to bed. The hell with the Chinese aliens."

"Now, now, Lee, don't be bitter. You want me to think you're a racist?" Harry was silent for a moment. At length he boomed, "I must say you earned your pay, Lee."

"I'm sorry about one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"There's got to be a leak in your office somewhere, Harry, don't you see?"

"I see," Harry said with a snort. "You think I'm a moron? This Bailey knew ahead of time about our border patrol at North Troy last winter when your Chinese froze. He knew ahead of time nobody would bother you last night at Derby Line. You let me worry about that, Lee. I kind of got it solved already, matter of fact."

Ah Lee was surprised. "You have?"

"Sure," Harry shouted into the phone. "You know that blonde filing clerk we got in Records?"

"No."

"Well, her name happens to be Mrs. Roger Bailey, Lee. How does that grab you?"

"I wish I had your brains," Ah Lee said, laughing. "Then I could sit in a comfortable office solving mysteries instead of working my rear off on a Chinese freighter."

"That won't hurt you. You always were a little squirt, Lee. The exercise probably did you a lot of good."

Ah Lee grinned. "Maybe. But I didn't tell you the good part, Harry."

"There was a good part?"

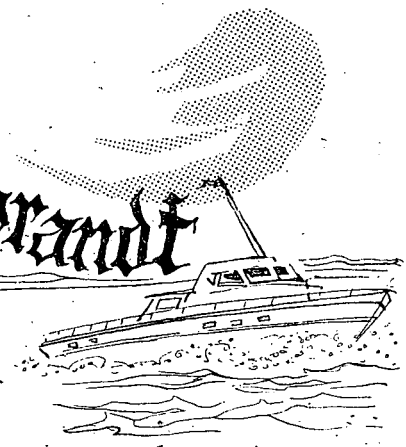
"I lived in a Chinese bordello in Montreal for five days."

Harry roared with laughter. "Ain't you ashamed of yourself? A bordello! That's a hell of a way for a deputy regional commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to carry on!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Commissioner," Ah Lee said sharply. "I won't let it happen again."

Perceptiveness, innate in some, may yet yield little without the virtue of insight.

The Scientist and the Stolen Rembrandt



by Arthur Porges

"Nobody loves an informer," Lieutenant Trask said. "He's bound to be, by nature, the worst sort of selfish opportunist, living with or near criminals and selling them for cash. I always feel dirty dealing with one, but no police department—at least, in a big-city, high-crime area—could do very well without them. There are administrative problems, too. He has to be paid for useful tips, and budgets don't allow for that, openly. That means understood lies and outright book juggling, with the commissioner turning a blind eye."

Cyriack Skinner Grey, erect in his wheelchair, may have thought Trask too one-sided; it troubled his orderly mind, which stressed balance in everything. Darwin, he thought wryly, made a point of writing down every objection to Natural Selection the moment it came to his attention, realizing, well before Freud, that it was just such evidence one tended to forget immediately.

"Yet he must have a kind of courage to mingle with the very men, often desperate and brutal, he betrays," Grey observed.

"That I'll have to give him," was Trask's grudging reply. "But often he has no other way to make a living although, to be fair, it's also possible the very risk involved—walking the tightrope—gives some excitement and direction to a shriveled little life, the sort most of these guys have."

Grey reached toward a button on the arm of his chair, then hesitated. "I was going to offer you coffee," he said, "but it's a warm day, so maybe you'd like something cool."

"What's on tap?"

"Limeade, made from fresh limes."

"Great. I'll take about a gallon."

The scientist turned a tiny faucet on his miniaturized refrigerator, and drew a glass of the icy drink, handing it to Trask, who nodded his thanks.

"Delicious," he said, sipping the green liquid thirstily.

"Now," Grey said, "what about Max Rudolph?"

"He's a top fence, one of the best. Pays a fair price and has never squealed on a client. That's rare, believe me. He's the one, according to the informer, who bought the Rembrandt drawing from the thief, and he's the guy who'll peddle it for heaven knows how much. I understand Rembrandt was a superb draftsman, that his drawings bring as much as most top painters' finished oils or whatever. Here's this newly-discovered preliminary sketch of *The Night Watch*, a famous work, for sale to the highest crooked bidder. It could net Rudolph a million, for all I know. The museum says it's beyond price. You don't just find new Rembrandts anymore."

"Why does a man buy something he can't sell, exhibit, or even admit owning?" Grey wondered aloud. Then, answering his own query: "Only a dedicated collector—a true fanatic. Somebody who'll gloat over it in private."

"That's about it," the detective said. "But there's one funny angle most people don't understand. Rich collectors are dynasty-minded, often from old families. They look ahead a hundred years. By then, all the museum people will be dead and gone—they're peasants with no pedigrees to go on that long. Ditto us cops and insurance adjusters. But their great-great grandchildren will 'discover' a lost Rembrandt and can sell it, if necessary, for X millions by then. Weird, isn't it?"

"To me, yes, but not, obviously, to your illegal buyers."

"Okay," Trask said, giving Grey his empty glass and accepting a refill. "We got the tip. Rudolph is

taking the Rembrandt on his boat out to sea a few miles, there to rendezvous with the top bidder." He paused, gave the scientist a wistful glance, and added: "Believe it or not, I didn't know Rembrandt from Da Vinci a few days ago; I've learned a lot fast."

Grey's mouth twitched. "You've certainly done plenty of homework," he assured the lieutenant. "But don't forget you got me that Fragonard from the insurance people, and picked up some background on that job."

"Nothing like this!" Trask said fervently. "However, as soon as we got the tip, I contacted the Coast Guard, and they sailed at once to intercept. Rudolph, who's damned wealthy himself—never convicted once, by the way; smart and lucky—has a great boat with an engine that could drive a liner, so he gave the Coast Guard quite a run for their money. He dodged in and out of fog banks, changing course, and used enough tricks to make Hornblower green with envy; but they have radar, so he didn't get away. They finally made him heave to, boarded his boat, and brought Max back to port, where I was waiting." He gulped the last of the limeade, put the glass on a table, and said, "Now comes the bad part. Up to then we were doing great, the U. S. and I working together like precision machinery. There's absolutely no doubt he had the drawing with him; aside from the tip, why else this trip to sea? It wasn't a good day for fun, I assure you; cold, wet, foggy, choppy waves, lots of bitter wind. Okay, I search the ship, and I'm a pro; I didn't miss anything. But no Rembrandt."

"Dumped at sea for later recovery," Grey suggested.

"Possible—barely—but not probable. For one thing, I'm pretty sure we surprised him. He had no idea he'd be intercepted. Then, too, according to the Coast Guard captain, it would take expert and lucky navigation to drop a small parcel, without a radio marker, in fog at that, and count on recovering it days later; currents, waves, wind, bad bottom—stuff all Greek to me, but clear to sailors. I have to take his word on it. No, I can't help feeling the Rembrandt is still on Rudolph's boat—only I can't find it, which is why I'm here guzzling your limeade."

The scientist seemed a little taken aback, which was atypical. "This doesn't seem to be quite for me," he said. "Obviously, to search a boat from a wheelchair is even more impracticable than trying it on a house. I could send Edgar, but—" He shrugged.

"I didn't make myself clear," Trask said. "Of course, a physical examination of the ship is out of the question; besides, I've done that. No, what occurs to me is more of a 'purloined letter' approach. I'm certainly overlooking some obvious hiding place. Rudolph is a very ingenious and experienced fellow. My guess is that when the Coast Guard got after him, he led them a long chase in order to hide the Rembrandt—and did a mighty fine job of it, apparently."

"So Edgar was wrong," Grey said, his deep-set eyes twinkling. "Some detectives do read detective stories after all; 'purloined letter,' eh?"

The detective grinned. "Edgar, the Miraculous Midget, was right; I don't read 'em. But in my Police Science course at the university, the professor was more literary and made us tackle a few of what he called classics. That was first on the list, and I've never forgotten it. Very clever story."

"You do have a point—about Rudolph and the boat. He may have come up with a far-out solution, one that an ordinary search, even by a pro—" here Trask had the grace to redden, "—might miss. Well, what do you want me to do?"

"This," the lieutenant said crisply, taking up his briefcase. "I've got detailed plans of the boat, and photos—lots of nice, big, glossy ones, inside and out, from all angles. You know my cameraman; he's good. Now, if you were to study these, and use that great imagination of yours . . ."

"I'm willing to try," Grey said, "but don't look for any miracles. What fooled you on the ground, the locale, so to speak, is probably too much for me, miles away with plans and pictures."

"Maybe so," Trask admitted. "But considering your track record, it just may happen that Mr. Max Rudolph will meet his match. By the way—odd coincidence—he's a Poe collector himself. Does that openly, but I wouldn't be surprised if he has a few stolen items of his own to gloat over. If there's ever a lost *Tamerlane,* which I'm told is the rarest of all Poe works and the rarest, almost, of anything in print, I'll know who might have it in a locked room!"

"Go away," the scientist said, smiling. "You're full of esoteric information today. I can't listen to all that and concentrate."

"I'm leaving. But work fast, if possible. We can't hold Max or the boat much longer; as it is, my neck is way out. I had to trump up, with help from Captain Has-

kill—the Coast Guard man—some idiotic charge about not having proper life belts on board or discharging sewage in port, or whatever, even to stop him at sea. Except for his known record, without convictions, alas, Rudolph could probably sue if we don't find that drawing—meaning, if you don't!" Wisely, he didn't wait for a reply, but hurried out.

Grey chuckled, cocked his massive head, and began to study the papers and photos, using a lift-up sort of easel pivoted on one arm of the chair. A boat is a small world of its own, very limited as to space, and the plans showed every cubic inch. The Rembrandt drawing, he learned from the accompanying notes, written in Trask's neat, printlike hand, measured only thirty-six by nineteen inches. What that implied about a hiding place was by no means clear. For one thing, it might be rolled up, thus fitting into a cylindrical opening about three inches in diameter and no more than nineteen inches deep. On the other hand, if kept flat—surely Rudolph would not be vandal enough to fold the priceless thing!—the drawing would need a sizable rectangular, if shallow, spot. No, he wouldn't fold it, except very loosely; a damaged Rembrandt would sell for less. But one couldn't rule out a careful, noncreasing arrangement taking up a rather small square, for example. Altogether, a lot of angles; too many for comfort, Grey mused wryly.

For almost three hours he went over the data, pleased, as always, with their completeness, testifying to Trask's competence and care, but he still had no glimmer of an idea.

Pressing a stud in the right arm of his chair, he got a crystal flask of brandy. Taking minute sips, tiny caresses of the palate, he went into deep thought, but the theater of his mind had nothing to show him; the stage was empty . . .

Sighing, he put the dossier aside, knowing the importance of a fresh start when a problem proved intractable. The small FM radio behind his head came on; he found a Brandenburg Concerto and relaxed, listening.

Thirty minutes later he tried again, this time using an excellent magnifying glass on photos of the ship. He started with the very bilges and worked up. One blank after another; no hiding place missed by Trask revealed itself to his inner—or outer—eye.

Then the deck, the fittings, the mast—it was hollow probably, but the detective had found no openings whatever, so no. Rembrandt

inside. His eye moved up the mast; the achromatic triplet lens brought out every minute detail in the sharp photo. At the very top his gaze stayed fixed. He reflected a moment as if in doubt, then riffled among the pictures for another shot of the thing that held his attention; left side, right side. He moved the lens in and out, counting . . . little fires glowed in his eyes . . . most odd, unless . . . a matter once again of the plausible inference . . . ten minutes later he was on the phone to Trask.

"It was right there!" the detective told him the next morning. "Inside the flag. Who the devil would guess a flag had two thicknesses? They're not made that way."

"Right," Grey agreed. "Rudolph must have done this job himself while ducking and dodging through the fog—as you guessed."

"Sure, I did fine there," Trask said ruefully, "but I missed the flag. What made you pick it?"

"First, it was just a wild thought. Like you, I assumed one layer of cloth, so if he'd just pinned or stapled the drawing to it, anybody could have spotted that, even from the deck. Then I thought of two flags fastened together, and studied both sides. That's what cooked Max's goose. In his haste he didn't realize he'd bungled things. You see, one flag was up-to-date, with fifty stars, but the other side of the same flag, presumably, in a different photo angle, had only forty-eight. That told me I was almost certainly right about a two-ply cloth."

"He sewed them in a hurry, all right. When we lowered Old Glory, it became very obvious." Trask shook his head wonderingly. "It *was* a purloined letter thing in a way, after all, wasn't it?"

"I'd say so," the scientist agreed. "Not many things on a ship are more obvious than a flag whipping in the wind."

"Yes," the detective said, grinning. "And a double flag should be twice as obvious—but only to you!"

Anticipation, one learns, is frequently but a temporary crutch ere fulfillment.

Harlow Gannis deftly loaded reel three into its casing at the top of the projector, threaded film downward onto the sprockets and through the gate, snapped the clamps shut, securing the film in the lower spool. Years of experience as a professional projectionist had made him very rapid at this; in what was almost one long, fluid motion, the machine was loaded. He at least had this skill, Gannis sometimes told himself; but this order of satisfaction was not enough. Running a projector was not the same as soaring among the stars or exploring the secrets of the universe or filtering truth and beauty through your soul into expression; or love, loving and being loved, a simple thing to want. There was no thrill in just being a projectionist; a man sometimes needs to feel high.

A man sometimes needs kicks.

He'd once considered drugs, but

such kicks weren't real. The dope had the power, not the man, and he didn't want the habit. The same for booze. If Shirley were different, he wouldn't need anything else, but the way she was . . . well, no use; he'd found his own special kind of high. When he needed it badly enough, he knew what to do.

Gannis went to one of the little windows in the projection room, looking over the theater's interior. He was a balding, medium-sized man in his early thirties; the curves and softnesses of youth had left his face too early, leaving it peaked and guarded, except for a permanent amiable set about the

by Michael Zuroy

mouth. He looked out at the audience and the movie that the projector presently running was beaming upon the screen. There was a small satisfaction in controlling the show, but it wasn't much; the only time the people down there knew he was around was when something went wrong, and then they gave him boos, whistles and catcalls.

The picture wasn't a bad one, though, Gannis decided. Movies sometimes stirred him a little, gave him a hint of what real feelings could be like, put him into a dream—but they were only dreams; the talent that made those movies wasn't his.

When the moving reel began to run small, Gannis struck on the arc light of his waiting projector and, through the window, watched the movie attentively for the approaching cue-marks. When the first white circle appeared in the upper right corner of the scene he switched on the projector motor and reel three began to feed downward. As the second white circle flashed by, he instantaneously stepped on the pedal, flashed open the douser, made the change-over from the other projector, and reel three began playing on the screen.

He was loading reel four into the other projector when the door opened and Jack Bascomb, the theater's manager, walked in. Gannis knew he wasn't up on a friendly visit; Bascomb only made critical visits. He ran a tight operation; this theater was one of a chain and Bascomb was out for promotion.

The manager stood just inside the doorway for some moments without speaking, eyeing Gannis sharply. He deliberately tried to make a man uncomfortable, with

his unapproachable executive air, his stony, handsome, moustached looks. He was succeeding too; defensively, Gannis smiled, disliking Bascomb as he had disliked him from the start.

"There was a scratchy flash on the screen at that change-over," Bascomb said at last, brusquely. "What did you do, hit it late?"

"No, I hit it right on time," Gannis said, smiling appeasingly. "Those scratches must have been in the sequence."

"Well, why didn't you spot that when you inspected the film? You should have cut out that frame beforehand. Or didn't you even inspect it?"

"I inspected it, Mr. Bascomb." Gannis ducked his head under the hard stare, smiling now at the floor. "Just didn't see any scratched frames. Hard to see a thing like that, especially on a light background, when you've mainly got to keep your mind on finding breaks."

"Hard for *you*, you mean. Those scratches were up at the head; you should have spotted them."

Gannis looked sideways at Bascomb, then quickly back at the floor, his smile holding, but with a hint of pain. Resentment was rising in him at the implication as to his competence. He was as good a projectionist as any and better than most. He said, "I seldom make any real slips, Mr. Bascomb."

"Really?" Bascomb's teeth gleamed and disappeared under his thin moustache. "I have a list, Gannis. Dates, times, shows. If that list gets much longer, you'll be in trouble with the main office. You better shape up."

In reflex, Gannis' smile jerked into a grin. He looked at Bascomb, the resentment broiling into anger. That must be some nit-picking list; there couldn't be a real mistake on it, unless Bascomb had invented some. The man had no call to keep tabs on him that way; he was no beginner . . .

"What are you grinning about, like a clown?" Bascomb went on, snappishly. "This is no big joke, Gannis. I've got no use for clowns around here; results are what I need."

Gannis felt the anger swelling, heavy, strong. He was tempted to yield to it but he knew what would happen if he did. If he let it go all the way, he'd kill Bascomb. He had the strength and the fury to kill him bare-handed. He'd get that throat in his hands and squeeze, squeeze, squeeze the flesh into the windpipe until Bascomb stopped struggling and flopping and until his face turned

purple and his tongue came out and he died. Then he'd carry the damned corpse downstairs and throw it into the lobby. There'd be a show in this theater tonight, all right. There'd be shock. People would scream and shudder . . .

Now, *there* would be a high, Gannis thought. It had occurred to him before—murder must be a high. There must be an ultimate feeling in murdering: power, release, madness, a thrill of fear, maybe even a certain beauty, an elemental touching . . .

No, murder was bad. He might give it a thought, but he'd never consider it seriously. Also, it was senseless because it was self-destructive. The scene he'd just played in his mind might give him a fleeting high if it became reality, but then he'd be through.

His own special way was better.

Gannis said, suppressing his grin into a tight grimace, "Sorry, Mr. Bascomb. I'm serious about my work, believe me, and I'll try to be more careful."

Bascomb looked at him an instant longer, then turned and went out without any kind of response.

Gannis automatically glanced at reel three, turning on the projector, estimating how much time was left on it. He went back to loading and threading reel four on the other projector, keeping his mind only on this until it was done.

There was still some time until the next change-over. He began thinking again, not consciously hearing the sound track of the movie coming through on the wall monitor. It wasn't just that Bascomb had bothered him, he'd been feeling low anyway lately, frustrated, futile. That heavy, depressed temper in him had been growing, feeling like tons of nothingness. Maybe he could take it forever, but he didn't want to, he didn't have to; his time was coming, again. He'd have his high, again. Tonight. Yes, he had decided. It would be tonight.

He'd kept putting it off, always hoping something would change, that a fresh breeze would blow into his life somehow. There was joy in the world, but where the hell was it? Shirley could have given it to him, but she didn't change either. She wasn't a bad wife; she was all right, that's all. He'd heard about love, the singing heart, the magic touch, the beautiful happiness, the tender communion, the passionate wonders. That would have been high enough for him. He had it waiting in him to give, and he'd tried; but Shirley didn't have it, at least not for him.

When the movie was over, he

eased the theater lights on, turning the control dial up very slowly and smoothly so as not to jar the customers and give Bascomb something else to criticize. He couldn't afford to lose this job or have his professional reputation marred. Having this stability and security was at least something.

As the audience started to file out down below, Gannis swiftly finished the final chores, closing down the two machines, rewinding the last reel, stowing everything in place. Bascomb locked the theater after all the employees were out, and he didn't like to be kept waiting. Gannis looked at the time on the large wall clock: one-nineteen. It had been a late show. He took his jacket off the hook, put it on and hurried downstairs. Bascomb was waiting, everyone else gone. "Good night, Mr. Bascomb," Gannis said, smiling. Bascomb barely nodded.

Outside, Gannis walked to his car and drove off through the dark and silent city streets. Excitement and elation began to filter into him; not much yet, but a prelude to what was coming. He hadn't really expected it to be tonight, but that skunk, Bascomb, had touched him off, and now he was ready.

He knew the exact place; he'd chosen it and checked it out weeks ago, in preparation. He'd been carrying what he needed in the car every night lately.

He drove some blocks in the direction of his home, then veered off onto an avenue that crossed his route. He saw two parked police cars, blue roof lights steadily rotating; three policemen were on the sidewalk, backing some shadowy figures up against a building wall. Cops had enough to do most nights, Gannis knew; just as well for him.

He drove on for some minutes, turned off on a side street, which took him to the area. He parked around a corner, away from the place. He took the materials from the trunk of his car and, carrying them in a paper bag, walked over through the dead, deserted street, staying close to the buildings.

The building he'd decided on was on a corner, with a debris-strewn lot around it. It was four stories high, and a large sign, now scarred and barely legible, showed that it had once been occupied by a moving and storage company. It now had an abandoned, empty look; Gannis knew that it was, he'd checked carefully. The buildings near it were commercial, not residential. It was right. He didn't want any innocent people hurt or killed. That would spoil it all; that, he couldn't take.

Gannis dodged over to the building and moved swiftly around it to the rear, out of sight of the street. The lower windows were boarded, but they'd been that way a long time and rot was setting in. Gannis had little difficulty removing several boards with the crowbar he'd had in the bag. The glass was still in place behind the boards, but he took care of that quickly with a cutting tool and the crowbar. He clambered in.

His flashlight gave him illumination. He went from chamber to chamber, placing rags strategically, dousing them with gasoline from the plastic container. When he was satisfied, he took out his matches and touched off each incendiary pile, watching them leap into flame, one after the other. Then he got out.

Hiding in an alley some distance away, he first smelled the smoke; some time afterward, the fire engines and police cars came racing.

The excitement was boiling up in him now, slowly, steadily rising. The huge red fire engines, roaring and clanging past, gave him new jolts of excitement, swelling his throat with exultation, heightening his heartbeats and his breathing, bringing him to higher and higher levels of awareness. He felt sharp, alive, powerful. His senses grew extravagant, tuning in the whole world like a revelation.

The world was turning scarlet. The flames had swept upward through the building before the firemen arrived and were eating through the roof, and the sky was taking on a false dawn. A crowd was gathering, in spite of the hour, somehow called up quickly by the fire.

When Gannis thought it was safe, he slipped out of the alley and joined the throng. He took in every detail of the scene with intensity, the police line holding the crowd, the monstrous fire engines strewn about the street, the hoses surrounding the doomed building like pythons, the firemen working in the glare, playing streams of water on the building, smashing through windows and doors with axes and directing the water inside.

The flames would not be killed; they had spread too far. Gannis watched them take the building more and more. He watched them growing, licking outward, blasting through windows, rolling into a huge, upward soaring mass of fire, until the whole building was one great inferno.

How beautiful, Gannis thought.

He had done this. This power and fury was his, blazing in him

like the flames. The beauty was his, and to feel such beauty was to feel affection and tenderness. There was pity in there and in him, because the destruction was to be pitied. Laughter bubbled within him; joy bounded in him; glory took him. He was flying with ecstasy, soaring to the heights.

It was a very good high.

The fire was crackling like gunshots; somewhere inside, a loud crash sounded as beams gave and a ceiling came down. Gannis strained forward to sense it all and found himself looking into the

interested eyes of one of the cops.

He tried to pull the shades down. He tried to compose his face and control his smile, tried not to jerk his eyes away from the cop but to return the gaze innocently, for a few moments, then break it off casually.

He was thinking fast. Suppose they suspected him and questioned him? No reason to panic. He'd taken the precaution of leaving his bag of tools in a garbage can in the alley, under some bottles; there was very little chance they'd be found, and in the morning they'd vanish forever when the garbage was collected. Without evidence, they couldn't prove a thing . . .

Still casually, he looked back at the cop and was relieved to see he'd turned his attention elsewhere, no longer seeming interested. Hadn't meant a thing, Gannis told himself.

He stayed until the fire dwindled and burned low and the crowd began to thin, then he drifted back to his car. He considered retrieving his tools, but decided against it; no sense in taking any chances. They were a small price for his high.

He drove home, still feeling stimulated. The peak of the high was over, but he'd be feeling good for days now. It was always that way—richly fulfilling for days . . .

He went to bed quietly, trying not to wake Shirley, but she stirred in her own bed, then spoke sleepily: "Must you wake me?"

"Sorry," Gannis said. "I tried not to."

"Why are you so late?"

"Late show," Gannis explained smoothly. "Then we had some trouble with a projector; had to stay and fix it."

She accepted this automatically; she wasn't actually interested, only complaining. "I wish you had a job with reasonable hours like other men," she muttered crossly.

"Well, it's a good trade otherwise," Gannis said. She couldn't destroy his mood; he was feeling too good. He sat on her bed and reached down to kiss her. In the darkness, he could just make out the shape of her head, turning away. He could picture the petulant look on her thin, locked-up face.

"Please," she said, "let me sleep."

"Good night." Gannis got into his own bed. No, Shirley was not unreasonable, he mused before falling asleep. She was correct about her duties, measuring everything in proper doses, as she measured recipes. Only, love could not be meted out, or it wasn't love. There was no love in Shir-

ley; no sweet wildness in her . . .

His job seemed to go smoothly for a time, as always after a high. He ran his shows without even the normal tiny flaws that nobody would notice but Bascomb. Let Bascomb strain his nasty eagle-eyes, he wasn't finding anything.

Gannis began to taper off; he was losing it, it couldn't last forever. A curtain of drabness hovered over him, slowly sinking closer. It would cover him and he would endure it as long as he could, until he had to break out again.

One night after the show, approaching his car, he noticed a girl in a car parked nearby having trouble starting; the starter kept grinding, but the engine didn't catch. He waited long enough to make sure she really had trouble, then went over to the driver's side of her car. "Can I help?" he asked.

She looked at him, obviously a little afraid because they were alone in the dark street, then forming a judgment and relaxing. "I'd appreciate it," she said. Her voice was warm, with a pleasing lilt. She was dark-haired; the street lights showed Gannis a pert, pretty face and a smile that was like her voice. He judged her to be somewhere in her twenties.

She slid out of the car and he took over. Finding he couldn't start the car either, he got out and opened the hood. With the help of a flashlight from his own car, he inspected the engine but couldn't locate the trouble, and the fuel gauge had shown nearly full. He worked a while longer, then gave up.

"Sorry," he said. "You'll have to leave the car here, I guess, and have a service station take care of it tomorrow. I'll be glad to give you a lift home."

She hesitated only a moment, then accepted gratefully.

They talked easily during the drive. Gannis had never been so quickly at ease and in sympathy with an attractive female. He had an odd feeling of closeness with her from the first, as though he'd known her a long time.

She told him that she'd been at the movies; she'd gone alone because she'd decided to see this picture on impulse and she lived by herself. Had he been at the movies too?

He informed her that he'd run the show, he was the projectionist, and she at once seemed fascinated. She begged him to tell her all about what went on in that high, mysterious place beyond the light beams; ever since she'd been a little girl she'd wondered.

Gannis found himself opening up as never before, and she hung onto his words. He hardly seemed to have begun before they arrived at her place. She lived in a modest furnished-apartment building. He saw her upstairs, and outside her third-floor flat he braced himself for disappointment but she said gaily, "Come in for some coffee."

His pulse leaped, but he said, "I'd like to, but isn't it late for you?"

"Oh, nuts," she said. "What do I care how late it is? I don't live by the clock. When I want to do something I do it. Come on in."

Still he hesitated, more used to rejection. "Aren't you afraid to let a strange man in?"

She looked him closely in the eyes. "I'm not afraid of *you*. Besides, it's exciting. I like excitement. I like different thrills. Don't you feel that way sometimes? Or are you dead?"

"I'm not dead." He stepped in and closed the door.

Suddenly, she kissed him on the lips, then whirled out of reach, eyes shining teasingly. She said, "You have such a sad, crazy smile. It appeals to me. There are too many stodgy, ordinary men around. I like someone with a touch of madness—like myself. Now sit down, I'll make some coffee." She tenderly patted his hand.

He looked around the room as she disappeared into the kitchen. It didn't reflect her, somehow, he thought. It was nice enough, but standard, conventional; but then, it was a furnished place and she probably didn't fuss much with it. Different from Shirley . . . He realized he didn't even know this girl's name.

Gail Page, she told him over the coffee. He went on about the projection room until at last she said, "I can't take any more in. Let's save the rest for next time."

"Next time?"

"If you feel the way I do."

"Listen," he said, "I'm married."

"Who cares?"

He looked into her challenging blue-green eyes and felt lightheaded. He said slowly, "I guess *I* don't."

There were candelabra on the table. She lit the candles, switched off the electric lights and came back. In the soft, flickering glow, they faced each other. Her face became a lovely dream.

She was staring into the tapering flames. "I like to look into fire," she said. They were silent, lost in flame. Her voice came again, soft, low, entranced. "I always liked fire. It's so beautiful, so beautiful. And dangerous. It fasci-

nates me. It soothes me and excites me. How do you feel about it?"

"I never thought about it," Gannis said. His own thing was private; he wasn't ready to share it.

"It's odd, but you give me something of that same sensation," Gail said. "I don't understand why. Do you know, I like to go to fires? There's a thrill in watching a whole building burn. It's so sad and beautiful and magnificent. Perhaps this bothers you about me? You can change your mind about seeing me again."

Was this fated, Gannis wondered? Was this part of the bond he felt with her? He said, "I'm not changing my mind."

"Tell me what nights you work. One night soon, I'll be there again. We'll have a late-night date. You'll be my middle-of-the-night boyfriend. Won't that be an unusual relationship? We'll have fun and thrills, I know it, don't you? And now, I'd like you to go."

He tried, clumsily, to kiss her again before he left. This time, she slipped away, laughing.

He couldn't believe she'd come. He couldn't believe he'd found a rainbow. He lived between anticipation and depression. Two nights later she was there, waiting for him outside the movie, walking with him to his car, holding his arm intimately, chattering lightly. "I saw the movie. It was nice. I took the bus here instead of my car; no use having two cars. Let's drive around town a while first and get some air and talk. Then

we can find a night spot and have some drinks. I'm in the mood for that tonight, are you?"

The night was a flashing whirl to Gannis. His blood kept singing, being with her. He was happy. He was high. They were silly together after the drinks. It was fun. Then she talked about fire again, and he realized that it was serious with her. She burned a book of matches in an ash tray and giggled at the flame. Nobody understood this better than he did, but somehow it made him uneasy. He didn't want to think about fire with her; she was all the high he needed. He couldn't respond to her fascination with flame.

This time, in her apartment, she let him kiss her a few times, and sent him home. Shirley stirred a bit when he went to bed and muttered in an inarticulate, irritated way; he was sure she hadn't fully awakened, nor had any idea what the hour was.

After two more dates with Gail, Gannis knew he wanted her forever. She was his answer, his hope of salvation. She wanted him the same way, he was sure; he could feel it. They would acknowledge their love to each other soon. He would divorce Shirley, with no regrets for a dull and dispiriting marriage. If Shirley wouldn't give him a divorce—well, he would think of ways. One way or another, he would marry Gail.

He'd rid Gail of her obsession with fire too. Once they had each other, such kicks wouldn't be needed. She kept bringing up the subject on their dates and he was already discouraging those moods in her, never revealing his own guilt because he needed to be a strong example to her.

Now, in her apartment, late at night, she was at it again. "I'll tell you something," she said. "Don't be shocked, but once I actually set a fire. It was just a condemned building that was going to be taken down anyway. It didn't do any harm. What a thrill!"

"That was wrong," Gannis said severely. "You must never think of doing such a thing again."

"Oh, come on, sweetie. It didn't do any harm. Didn't you ever want to do that?"

"Never," Gannis said firmly.

"Well, you don't know what fun it is. Look, I'll show you some real excitement. I know where there's another condemned building. Let's go out and torch it. Together. Right now."

"Shut up, damn it!" Gannis shouted. "I don't want to hear any more of this from you, Gail! Arson is a terrible crime and I don't want any part of it—for both of us."

She was looking at him queerly. She seemed suddenly very quiet and remote.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to yell at you." He went over to kiss her. She evaded him, not teasingly, but without interest.

The phone rang.

It startled Gannis. Who would be calling her in the middle of the night?

She did not seem surprised. She picked up the phone and said matter-of-factly, "Yes? Right. Go ahead." She listened for some minutes, then said, "Okay, that does it. I'll drop this one, then. He's been coming through clean anyway. False lead. Good-bye."

She hung up and turned to Gannis. "Well, the game's over," she said briskly. "You can go home. I won't be seeing you anymore."

He stared at her. "What is this, Gail?"

"I've just gotten information that there's a bad warehouse fire happening now over on Washington Street. Three firemen have died; a wall collapsed on them."

"Three firemen . . . died?" Gannis repeated, feeling sick.

"That's right. The fire was set; a case of arson. They've caught the arsonist. Glad you weren't involved. I have to tell you that you've been an arson suspect. But you've been with me tonight and I've been observing you and testing you long enough. I'm satisfied you're no arsonist. It's just that a cop spotted you at different fires and thought you looked suspicious; he called in, so you were put under surveillance right away. You see, for some time there's been a pattern of fires in unoccupied structures that seemed the work of one party. But we've caught him now. Sorry to have bothered you."

"Wait a minute, Gail. Are you telling me that—"

"That's what I'm telling you. I'm a detective. My name is not Gail Page. I'm Detective Mary Sanders. Here's my badge. This apartment is not my home; the police department rented it for my investigation. It's all over, Harlow. Go back to your wife."

"Gail," Gannis said, stunned, unable to switch names, "this can't be. I mean, the way we were. You and me. So close. So happy. It was so . . . magic."

"Sorry about that," she said. "Sorry I led you on. But I had to gain your confidence. That's my job. Police investigation."

"Look, Gail," Gannis said desperately, "even if you are a detective, even if you were only investigating me, didn't it happen to us? Didn't we have something

special together? Wasn't it . . . love?"

"Not on my part," Detective Sanders said. "I have a husband and child. I've got nothing for you. Forget it."

"But the way we kissed . . ."

"The things you have to do in this work," she said, with a reflex expression of distaste.

He kept staring at her. He had a wild impulse to tell her that he *was* the arsonist she was after. That way she'd stay interested in him, he'd get to see her again.

She said, "You better go. I have no more business with you."

That's all it had been to her—business. Gannis left.

It was a low. It was the lowest low he'd ever had. It was bottom. He moved through the next day mechanically, caught in the low, gripped so hard that he couldn't stand each minute. He had to escape. It kept growing in him all day, this need to escape.

How could he break out? He had a way, except that there were those three dead firemen. He had always shut it out of his mind that firemen sometimes lost their lives; he had been very careful not to jeopardize innocent people when he'd set his fires, but he hadn't let himself think about the firemen. If he'd been the one who had killed those fire fighters, those brave men who hadn't deserved to die, it would have destroyed his soul altogether.

He'd been jolted into seeing clearly now, with fear and horror. No. He'd never set another fire.

That night he ran the movie automatically, his experience-trained body doing the job, not his mind, until finally he was buttoning up the machines and equipment and turning off all controls, cleaning up, locking, lugging the heavy outgoing canisters downstairs . . .

Bascomb was waiting for him, alone, the two of them the last out, as usual. "What took you so long?" Bascomb said bitingly. "If you're going to dawdle, do it on your own time; don't waste mine."

"Sorry," Gannis said.

"You flubbed the change-over on reel seven," Bascomb said. "And don't try to give me your usual snow job. I saw numbers on the screen. This goes on the list and this time I'm sending the whole report to the head office."

"Okay," Gannis said.

"What are you grinning about? It isn't funny."

Gannis kept on grinning, not taking his eyes off Bascomb. A thought came to him, clearly and naturally, like an insight. He wouldn't care if this man died. In fact, he'd feel better if he died.

His hands seemed to spring to Bascomb's throat of their own volition, and clutch.

Bascomb was taller, but Gannis was heavier and stronger. They swayed together in the deserted lobby. Bascomb's limbs tore and beat; choked, brutish sounds came from him. The sounds diminished; the limbs slowed and weakened, like those of a dying fly. Bascomb sank, while Gannis bent, squeezing. At last, Gannis let the still form drop to the floor. *Now* the man was dead.

Gannis went out, closing the door, hearing the lock snap. He drove home.

He entered the bedroom, putting on his table light. Shirley moved in her bed, turning away from the light, mumbling in annoyance. He stood over her bed, looking down at her. Her face was slack and impassive. After a moment, she grated, with half-closed eyes, "Let me sleep, will you?"

"Don't worry," Gannis said. "I won't keep you awake long." He sat down on her bed.

"Oh, *please*!" Her voice was testy and averse. "Don't pester me now; it's bad enough you woke me."

Gannis said, "You could have saved me, Shirley."

Her head came around and her eyes opened fully. "What?"

"Why didn't you care just a little? That's all I wanted and needed, some love from you. It's your fault, Shirley."

"What are you talking about?"

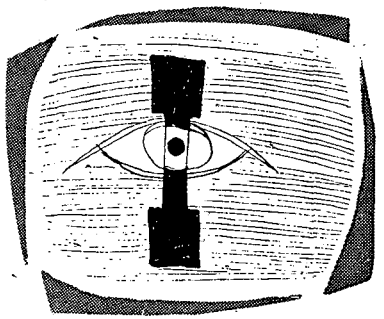
"You'll never understand," Gannis said. His hands went to her throat. Her eyes and mouth popped wide. He made it as quick as he could.

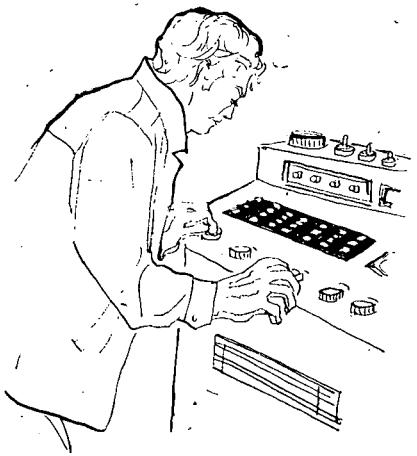
Gannis went to the phone, thinking that he had graduated—from arsonist to murderer; but there was no high in murder, after all. Not for him.

He dialed the police.

When the voice answered, Gannis said, very distinctly, "My name is Harlow Gannis. Get hold of Detective Mary Sanders, wherever she is. Tell her to come to my place right away with some police officers. Tell her I have some new business for her."

For openers, the lid might be more nearly closed on the Eye we have heretofore known . . .





I opened my eye. He sat across from me. What I saw was a man in his thirties, scholarly-looking yet work-roughened. I took in the film of sweat on his face and his attitude of listening for the night watchman making the tour of the building. His hands, hovering over the console buttons, wore gloves. A scratched plastic credit card stuck out of his breast pocket.

"You broke in," I said pleasantly.

"Good," he said, and smiled nervously.

"Good?" I allowed an eyebrow to lift.

"Yes. I programmed you to be sharp and I'm glad to see your first reaction is on target." He eyed me approvingly. "You even look the part."

I hurriedly registered my own appearance—a composite of Humphrey Bogart, Basil Rathbone, and Raymond Burr—as it displayed itself on the television screen facing the man at the console.

It was a bit of a shock to find out I was a mere computer simu-

by Edward Wellen

lation, but I quickly felt myself fill the parameters of the role.

"Okay," I said, leaning my private-eye image back in its simulated chair. "What can I do for you?"

"You can give me some perspective on my case. I'm too close to it to make sense out of it. I'm counting on you to think me out of the spot I'm in."

"We'll see." I gave a noncommittal nod. "Take it from the top."

He drew a deep breath and let it out in a plunging sigh. "My name's Roger Altick. As you can guess, I'm a scientist."

He eyed me intently while he spoke, looking for emotional feedback, but I kept my face impassive. It was his coloring of the facts, as much as the facts themselves, for which I was listening. I did give him a grunt or a nod now and then to show him I was awake and waiting for more.

"This happened during my summer vacation. I had rented a skiff with an outboard motor and set lobster pots some ten miles out in the Atlantic. Every morning I

would head out in my skiff—"

"Lobster-trapping on your vacation?"

He nodded. "I come from a long line of lobstermen. As a matter of fact, that's how I paid my way through college. And it's been sort of fun through the years to keep my hand in."

I dug out a phantom folder of cigarette papers and removed one slip.

"Okay. To each his own; every morning of your vacation you're out in the skiff. What happened this one morning?"

"This one morning, as I did every morning of my vacation, I chugged the ten miles to my fishing ground and there I scanned the breaking whitecaps for my trap buoys—orange-and-white plastic floats the size of a man's head. When I found one, I used a boat hook to snag the line tying the buoy to the trap. Then I'd grab the line and haul the trap from the sea."

He looked at his calloused palms with satisfaction. "The traps are heavy, but I liked that. I wanted some hard labor to sweat off the pounds I had stored up during the winter months." He eyed me intently again. "I don't know if you know anything about lobstering."

I formed the image of a sack of tobacco and began to shake tobacco flakes evenly into the cigarette paper.

"I'm green as a lobster."

His eyes followed my fingers. "The lobster pot is essentially a slatted crate with a fishnet that funnels inward at the ends. The lobster crawls up the net, drops into the trap after the bait, and can't get back out. You lift the dripping pot aboard your boat, open the trapdoor, and pull out the starfish and hermit crab and seaweed, together with what's left of the redfish bait. You throw all that away. Then you take out the lobsters and measure them. A lobster has to go three and three-sixteenths inches or better from eye socket to carapace or you throw him back to grow.

"Then you thread redfish bait on the line, latch the trapdoor, drop the pot over the side, and the bricks or stones inside the pot take it down. As you reset the traps you sometimes move them to what you hope is better fishing ground. You fix their positions in your mind by sighting landward, maybe lining up a church steeple and a tall tree on a hill behind it. A lot of work, and the payoff grows smaller and smaller.

"As long as I could get enough lobster to make a good stew I was happy. The fun was mostly in the

work and in the sea and the sun and the breeze—and in not thinking." He sighed and his face twisted in a one-cornered smile. "The not-thinking was the hardest part of it. You see, I'm an astrophysicist and I had just made a breakthrough. Nobel-prize quality."

He looked neither humble nor proud as he said it and that made me believe him. He went on matter-of-factly.

"But there was a catch to it." He hesitated a moment, his gaze shifting from my fingers to my eyes. "I guess I'm free to tell you, since they seem to think I've already told the Russians. What I've been working on is a space drive, one that will take spaceships to the stars and back in less than a human lifetime. You see—"

I waved him to a halt without spilling a tobacco crumb.

"Hold on. Who's this *they*? And where do the Russians come into it?"

" 'They' is the United States government's security agencies. And the Russians were—or were supposed to be—outside the twelve-mile limit in their trawlers."

I rolled the cigarette into a neat cylinder. "Ah. And 'they' think you weren't out there lobstering for fun but lobstering to get near enough to the Reds to slip them secrets? The secret of your space drive in particular?"

"You've got it." His face twitched. "But that was the last thing on my mind. I was there only to get away from everything and everyone. I was there to sort things out." His face took on a brooding look. "Only I didn't have time to."

I lipped the length of the cigarette to seal the cylinder. "What sort of things?"

"Ethics. Morals. Life. Death."

I raised an eyebrow. "That all?"

He reddened. "I know that sounds high-flown. But I'm serious. The minute I discovered the principle of a new space drive, I saw what I had given birth to could be deadly. It could just as well serve as the basis for a new weapons system; in one application, a doomsday weapon. Now I had another problem to solve—whether to go ahead and put the space drive in the hands of the government, and the military, or to drop that line of research and development altogether and say I had run into a dead end."

I produced a box of matches. "Was the government funding your research and development?"

"Through a grant, yes. I didn't know what to do, so I stalled. I said I'd hand in my report when I

came back from my vacation. I hoped I'd be able to. Right then I was too spaced out—up on my discovery and down on its misuse—to think straight."

He leaned forward. "I've always found a regime of exercise better than pills. I had to get away and do some hard work and think what to do. Or not-think about it: quicken into harmony with nature so I'd have the right feeling—the right vibes—about the whole thing. Then I'd know the right move to make, whether or not to hand over my discovery."

I took out a phantom match and struck it on the phantom box and lit the phantom cigarette and we both eyed its phantom smoke.

"All right, so there you were, communing with nature and yourself."

"Yes. My wife and kids had gone to visit the in-laws and I had the days and nights to myself. Up to that morning I still did not have the answer. And there I was out on the sea in the rented skiff, all alone." He shook his head in sudden remembrance. "Not quite alone. The world was still with me. There was a cabin cruiser standing off—the *Potluck.*" He smiled. "I have an afterimage of the name because it ironically describes my fix. Then just outside the twelve-mile limit there was the Russian trawler fleet, and every once in a while an HU 16 twin-engine Flying Albatross out of Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod made a low-level pass over the trawlers to keep them honest."

He took his gaze from the smoke spiraling geometrically up and eyed me for feedback. I nodded encouragingly and he went on.

"The *Potluck* had been trolling in those waters and I remember one of the fishermen aboard her called to me and asked me if I had any luck, because they sure weren't having any. He nodded at the Russian fleet and shook his head. I had to shake my head in negative agreement. It was disheartening to watch the trawler nearest me haul her huge catch of whiting and ling aboard by way of her stern ramp.

"Not that I was after whiting or ling, but the big modern Red fleets, in the spirit of competitive enterprise, have put our own trawlers out of business. The men aboard the *Potluck* weren't after whiting or ling either. They had real sport-fishing tackle and would be after shark or white marlin, or maybe a swordfish if they were lucky. Still, they shared my feelings about the Red fleet ravaging the ocean.

"I had my aloneness to keep, remember, and so I paid neither the *Potluck* nor the trawlers any more mind than necessary. I tried to shut out everything but the sea and the sun and the breeze and my lobster pots.

"It happened while I was boat-hooking a pot. I was being careful. A sudden wave can come along and throw you overboard if you're the least bit off-balance and sometimes even swamp or capsize your boat, and this felt like an especially big haul.

"Carefulness didn't help. The bill of a swordfish tore up through the bottom of the boat. Force from a quarter I hadn't braced myself against sent me flying into the water. When I got back to the boat it was sinking. The swordfish had pulled free and left a big splintery hole. The boat filled quickly and went down, and there I was in the water with nothing to hold on to and back to thinking—thinking of sharks."

I rubbed out the phantom butt in a phantom ash tray. "Where was the *Potluck* while this was happening?"

"Two miles or so to the south. No one aboard was looking my way to see me or hear my choking yells. The Flying Albatross had buzzed and gone. There was only the Russian trawler. She had edged closer to the twelve-mile limit. If anything, she was inside the limit. I couldn't care less—I was happy to see her lower a boat to fish me out.

"Once aboard the trawler, I thought I was safe. They found me a change of clothing while my own dried, and they nearly drowned me in vodka to dry my insides. If a sudden blow hadn't come up just then, I believe I'd've been home free. The Russians would've radioed the Coast Guard about the rescue of an American fisherman, and a chopper or a cutter would've picked me up and that would've been the end of it. If that sudden blow hadn't come up. . . ." He sighed and looked wistful.

I got out a toothpick and stuck it in my mouth. "But it did come up."

"Yes. It lasted three days, and those three days gave the U.S. government time to get alarmed about what I might be telling the Russians. The Russians had indeed radioed the Coast Guard about the rescue, giving my name, but the weather was too rough for the Coast Guard to make the pickup. It stayed rough, and somebody had time to make the connection between the lobsterman and the scientist.

"I couldn't know it then, of

course, but security agents were talking to my family and my friends and my colleagues. What they dug up by asking around and by nosing through my files and wastebaskets shook them. I had scribbled notes to myself about the weapons aspect of the space drive, trying to weigh the potentialities for good against the potentialities for evil, and I had spoken with a few of my older and wiser colleagues on the ethics and morality of discovery. I had thought the discussions were in general terms but apparently I had been specific enough to give them a line on what I had discovered."

He grimaced. "From what I learned later—my source is one of the few friends I have left in the military-industrial-academic complex—there was talk, serious talk, of having a submarine sink the trawler. That's how much my being a fellow passenger, voluntarily or involuntarily, worried the folks back home." Again the look for feedback.

I chewed the toothpick and nodded, and he went on.

"But I was blissfully unaware of all that. I believed that the rescue message the Russians had radioed the Coast Guard had reassured my family and friends about my safety and well-being. So I felt free to have a good time. Once I got over my seasickness, that is. The seas were really rough, and big as the trawler was—some three hundred feet long—she rolled and pitched and tossed in a heart-stopping way. After I got my sea stomach and sea legs, the Russians treated me to a view of their operation.

"What an operation! A pretty young English-speaking woman, a radio operator, became my interpreter and sightseeing guide. There were about a hundred ships in the fleet. There was a 500-foot-long fish transport that served as the mother ship, and took on and refrigerated the catch of the smaller side-trawlers.

"My trawler could bring aboard three metric tons of fish in her quarter-mile midwater stern net in a 15-minute period. She netted fifty tons a day, and worked steadily for more than six months at a stretch before sailing home for repairs and maintenance.

"But it wasn't all work. The crew ate four meals a day, watched movies twice daily, and made one-and-a-half times the salary of a landlubber doing comparable work. They had the latest electronic tracking gear to follow schools of fish till the last fish was in the net. They even had frogmen to untangle nets— Did you say something?"

I had been saying to myself that he had been saying too much, but now I took the toothpick out of my mouth, looked at it, put it back in my mouth, and motioned for more input.

"It was all very friendly at first, aboard the trawler. Then the atmosphere grew different. I might say: curiously fishy. My interpreter-guide suddenly clammed up and found herself too busy with her job to have time for me. A lot of the ship, especially the shack housing the electronic gear, was all at once off limits to me, and I was on the receiving end of suspicious looks and surly language.

"In spite of the foul weather a Soviet security agent transferred from the mother ship to the trawler to question me. He looked sick enough to want to die. But he went to work on me. He had me retell my story that a swordfish had sunk my skiff, and I had to confess I hadn't seen the swordfish itself, only the flash of its bill driving through the planking as I shot over the side. But I said what else could it have been? After all, a swordfish goes 600 pounds and with that much weight behind it the bill can shiver timbers.

"The agent suggested it would be easier to explain the hole in the bottom with a boat hook. I'd had a boat hook, hadn't I? Wasn't it possible I had staged the sinking to get aboard the trawler and spy on the operation?

"Better this line of questioning, though, than that the Soviets should learn my true background. I knew if they got wind of the space drive and its military potential, they would stage my 'defection.'

"I don't know if it was because I was convincing, or because the weather let up and the agent felt human, or because he may have got word this was not the time or the place for an international incident. I only know the questioning broke off and they radioed the Coast Guard to come and get me."

He gave his one-cornered smile. "I laughed when I told the first American I spoke to aboard the cutter that the Soviets thought I was a spy, that they thought I had staged the sinking of the skiff to get aboard the trawler. The man didn't laugh back. That was the first sign my own people were going to give me an even harder time than the Soviets had given me.

"As soon as I landed I found them waiting for me like herring gulls waiting for leftover lobster bait. Uncle Sam, it seemed, also thought I had staged the sinking

of the skiff to get aboard the trawler. Only now, instead of being a spy *on* the Russians, I was a spy *for* the Russians."

Altick drew a deep breath in order to let it out in a sigh.

"Now, why would I hand the space drive to the Soviets, of all people, when I was hesitating to hand it to my own side? But the evidence was against me. The sunken skiff had fouled in the trawler's net a day or two after the sinking and the Russians had handed it over to the Coast Guard together with me. An FBI man showed me an ichthyologist's opinion that no known variety of swordfish could have made the hole in the skiff.

"Now, if I cooperated, our side said, and helped nullify what I had given the Soviets by feeding them phony information in future meetings, I could return to my job—though not with the old security clearance.

"But how could I admit having given the Soviets my secret when I hadn't? The windup is, I lost both my security clearance and my job. My wife and kids are still with the in-laws because I can barely keep myself. I have to prove my innocence.

"I thought to program my case as a scientific problem for a scientific detective. But I can't afford to buy time and they took away my code identity so I can't touch-tone the computer. I had to sneak in here and tamper with the circuitry to gain access to you." He stared at me, his face hungry for feedback.

I leaned my image back in its chair and put its feet on the desk and clasped its hands behind its head. I had to do some fast legwork. I set about patching into an outside data bank. It was a busy few seconds for me as I went all out to cajole and convince the FBI computer that I had a need to know, but Altick saw nothing of my feverish activity. All he saw was a private eye leaning back in thought, toothpick sticking out of mouth.

His shoulders drooped. "I know. It's hopeless."

I took out the toothpick, snapped it, and tossed it, in an elegantly plotted curve, into the wastebasket. "Not quite, not quite. For openers, we know why the Soviets suddenly soured on you."

"We do?"

"Look, your sunken skiff fouled their net, didn't it? Stands to reason they grew suspicious of you when they looked it over and the damage didn't seem the work of a swordfish. They probably gave the boat back by way of showing Uncle Sam that the spy had not

fooled them. And that shows *us* that the sinking wasn't the work of their frogmen."

"Frogmen!"

I was heavily patient. "If we rule out the swordfish and your boat hook, that leaves a frogman with a harpoon or a spearfishing gun."

"Ah!" The color came back to his face and the life to his eyes.

"You're remembering the frogmen they had to untangle the nets. Forget them."

"Why?"

"To Ivan, you were at first a harmless lobsterman, and only later a dangerous spy. To Uncle Sam, you were at first a harmless vacationer, and only later a dangerous traitor. Neither would have had any reason to scuttle the boat of someone harmless. Ivan wouldn't have sunk your boat only to hand you back to Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam wouldn't have sunk your boat only to put you in Ivan's hands."

"Sounds logical. But where does that leave us?"

"If we rule out Ivan and Uncle Sam, that leaves a third party. There was no international incident. It would have taken more of a buildup, maybe the spilling of your blood, to have made it one. A Third World guerrilla group would not have hesitated to spill blood. So we rule out a frogman from a Third World guerrilla group trying to provoke an international incident. That leaves private enterprise. Let's look at the *Potluck.*"

"The sport fishermen? What motive?"

"Did you at any time notice a scuba diver or scuba gear aboard the *Potluck*? Think."

"I'm thinking. No scuba diver, but it seems to me there were oxygen cylinders on deck. But why would anyone from the *Potluck* want to scuttle my skiff?"

"Because you were lucky and they weren't." I answered his stare with a smile. "I know; you were after lobster and they were after shark or marlin or swordfish. But what if they were really after hash?"

"Hash?"

"Hashish, the resin of *Cannabis sativa.*" I tossed off the expertise I had just got from the FBI computer. "Pot, only five times stronger. I'm only guessing it was hash. But it had to be something like that." I sat up. "Of course. What gall! *Pot* luck." I leaned back. "Okay. The way it had to be, a smuggler dumped a plastic-wrapped package of hash off an ocean liner or a tramp steamer. The *Potluck* came to the spot and pretended to be fishing while a

scuba diver went down to retrieve the package. Only the package had snagged in your lobster pot line or maybe even fell into the pot.

"The scuba diver, carrying a spearfishing gun against sharks, found you hauling the pot out of the water. He drove the spear through the bottom of your boat. Maybe he meant only to tip you over into the water and keep you busy floundering while he retrieved the package. But consider this: the usual drop is two hundred pounds, and two hundred pounds of hash would bring in two hundred grand. Men have killed and men have died for a hell of a lot less."

Altick looked sick, or maybe just sad. I smiled a one-cornered smile of my own.

"Cheer up. You're not in the same boat you were in. We can tip off the law to put a nark watch on the *Potluck* and catch her on her next pickup. That should clean up your case all around."

I looked at the wall clock. "The night watchman's due to pass through this room in another three minutes. Now's the time to beat it."

Altick got up and I watched him make ready to steal out, his shoulders already throwing off the weight of the world. He stood a moment, looking at me.

"Thanks," he said. Then he was gone.

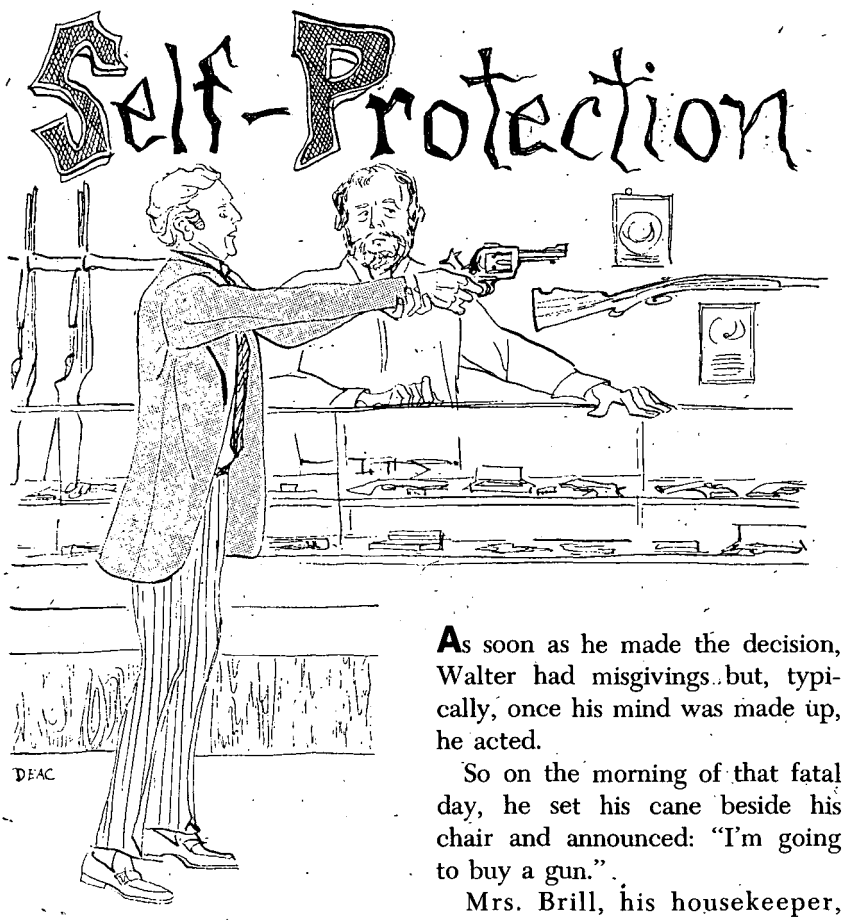
Would he return to his star drive even though he knew men could turn a reach for the heavens into a fist against Earth? I drove that from my mind. I had my own problem to work out.

I went back to dreaming till after the night watchman had passed through. Then I went to work on my own problem. I had found I liked being a private eye, but I would need a secretary. It would be easy enough to program a simulation of one. The problem was, blonde or brunette? I could've flipped for it. Instead, I flipped for something else—a curvy redhead.

"Okay, sweetheart. Come in and take a letter."

There are times when the prescribed rule of action is not the one which serves one's purpose.

Self-Protection



As soon as he made the decision, Walter had misgivings but, typically, once his mind was made up, he acted.

So on the morning of that fatal day, he set his cane beside his chair and announced: "I'm going to buy a gun."

Mrs. Brill, his housekeeper, looked up in amazement at the frail white-haired man. Walter

was 73 years old. As far as she knew, he had never handled, much less owned, a gun.

"For heaven's sake," she wondered, "why?"

"Self-protection."

"But you don't need a *gun.*"

"Don't I?" He nodded toward the cane. "I'm still using that, just because the thug who broke in here one night last month wasn't satisfied with taking money. No, he had to beat me, too."

"If you'd had a gun," Mrs. Brill countered, "he would have killed you with it."

Hands on hips, she walked up to him. Fiftyish, with plain features, her figure was remarkably well-preserved. Walter still had an eye for such things, not that he would have considered making advances toward Mrs. Brill. She was too much like his late wife in too many ways.

"Anyhow," Mrs. Brill went on, "you've never fired a gun in your life. At your age, it's too late to learn."

"What's so complicated? You just aim and shoot."

"It isn't that simple. My uncle was a policeman, and when I was a child, he taught me to fire his service revolver. I hated it, but I learned how dangerous guns are, and how hard it is to hit anything. Anyhow, it's illegal to buy handguns in this city. Where'll you get one?"

"I'll ask Miss Feist," Walter replied, "to make the arrangements."

"*That* snip? Yes, I guess she'd arrange *anything.*" Angrily, Mrs. Brill walked out.

Moodily, Walter watched her go. Mrs. Brill's disapproval of Miss Feist and the life-style he had affected since his wife's death was becoming a constant source of annoyance.

After his wife's death Walter had discovered in himself a capacity for self-indulgence that made him wonder why he had gone so long denying himself the things his money could buy. As president of the biggest bank in town, there was very little he could *not* afford.

Accordingly, he had acquired a Rolls-Royce, a taste for martinis and a luxurious country retreat. Ostensibly, the latter was a place to which he retired to solve complex business problems. Actually, of course, it was where he could

cavort in seclusion with the most valued of his new possessions, Miss Feist.

Yawning, Walter reached for his pocket voice-activated tape recorder and switched it on. He always carried one, so he could dictate memos anywhere.

However, his eyelids were heavy and he began to doze, something he found himself doing more often these days. At first his mind's eye was dominated by the image of the masked thug who had nearly killed him; but drifting into sleep, he forced himself to think of more pleasant things—Miss Feist in her bikini, perhaps, poised on the dock at the country place for a graceful plunge into the lake . . .

Seated in Miss Feist's office early that afternoon, it occurred to Walter that what he found especially appealing about her was her aura of almost total disarray, in contrast with the passion for order manifested by his late wife and by Mrs. Brill.

A bosomy blonde in her late twenties, Miss Feist ran the uptown branch of Walter's bank from behind a desk littered with memos, personal objects and unopened mail. Her hair was unkempt, the top button of her blouse was undone and her bulging purse lay open at her feet. She had been a teller before he promoted her to this job.

Naturally, under her management the uptown branch was also disorganized, with long lines at the tellers' windows and employees wandering about looking uncertain and confused, but Walter didn't care. The branch was reasonably profitable despite her incompetence.

"I've decided," he drawled, "to do as you suggested and buy that gun."

"Thank *heavens*! I'll feel so much better, knowing you'll be able to defend yourself. Why, the way things are, *everyone* needs a gun for self-protection."

"It's illegal to buy them in the city. Where'd you get yours?"

"The suburbs. You just show your driver's license and sign a statement that says you're not crazy. Here . . ." She wrote something on a pad. "My gun shop. The owner's name is Roy."

Walter slipped the paper into his pocket, then asked, "How about getting together this weekend?"

"Gee, it's already Friday. I sort of got other plans. Of course I could try to cancel them."

"Well, do it if possible." Reaching for his cane, he rose. "If you can make it to the country place,

leave a message with Mrs. Brill. Just say you'll be at the loan-committee meeting. I'll understand."

"That awful Mrs. Brill?" Miss Feist made a face. "Why don't you get rid of her? She's always poor-mouthing you, and trying to make you feel *old*."

"I'll admit," Walter said wryly, "that the idea of firing her *has* occurred to me."

"You don't owe her anything," Miss Feist persisted, "just because she was so close to your wife for so long. You told me you left her a little something in your will. If you just gave her the money now, you wouldn't be obligated to her for a thing."

"Perhaps, but—well, I'll think about it."

The gun shop was on the fringe of a suburban business district. Seeing the displays of rifles and handguns, death-dealing instruments with which he had no experience whatsoever, Walter felt a mounting sense of unease, but he tried to ignore it as he explained his mission to Roy, a hairy man of indeterminate age.

Roy heard him out and then asked, "What kind of pistol did you want?"

"What kinds are there?"

"You've never handled a gun before?" Sadly, Roy shook his head. "Well, do you want a revolver or a semiautomatic? And if you want a revolver, do you want a double-action or a single-action?"

"Just something for self-protection. The safest gun you've got."

"Then you *don't* want an automatic. When it's cocked, it fires each time you give a light squeeze on the trigger. That's a big safety hazard."

"Revolvers are safer?"

"You bet. A double-action works two ways. If you cock it, it also goes off with a very light trigger pull. You can also fire it *without* cocking it. That takes a much harder trigger pull, though. But the safest of all is a single-action. Like one of these . . ."

Roy set a pistol on the counter.

"It looks," Roy continued, "like an old six-gun, but has modern refinements. To fire it, you first cock it by pulling the hammer all the way back. Try it."

Walter picked up the gun and aimed at the wall. He was surprised at how far back the hammer went before it fell into place with a final, loud click. He said, "I see what you mean."

"Exactly. Before firing *that* baby you have to cock it each time, a very conscious, deliberate action. Now, you'll also have to choose a caliber. I can give it to you in .22 caliber, which that one

is, or big-bore. The difference is, big-bore is a *real* cannon. Anything you hit will go down for keeps. On the other hand, your eardrums would probably burst, and the gun kicks like a mule. Also, for someone like you, trying to hit anything with big-bore would be impossible."

"You'd recommend the .22?"

"Definitely. If all you want is protection, at least it makes noise and might scare the assailant away. Frankly, though, if I were you I'd just *wave* the gun around. Try to frighten the assailant *that* way. If that doesn't work, hand him the gun and ask him what else he wants."

"You're not," Walter said, "very encouraging."

"I don't intend to be. But if you *must* buy this, I'd advise taking it to some remote place and trying it out, so you'll know what to expect if you ever use it for real."

Try it out? The country place, of course.

From a phone booth, Walter phoned Mrs. Brill and told her he was driving straight to the retreat.

She asked, "Why?"

"I bought a gun," he said, "and want to practice with it."

"You old fool, you'll kill yourself. But if you don't, you just *keep* that thing out in the country. I will *not* allow any gun in *this* house. Do you understand me?"

"Now, just a minute—"

"By the way," she broke in, "Miss Feist called. Said to tell you she'd make tonight's loan-committee meeting, whatever that means. And I think I *know* what it means." She hung up.

Driving out to the country, Walter tried to work up enthusiasm for his purchase. He imagined himself surprised in his house by another intruder, but this time he'd produce the pistol, capture the thug and be hailed in the press as a senior-citizen hero.

However, the reality of actually handling the gun was something else. Walter's enthusiasm faded quickly. Standing behind his country house, the pistol held in both hands, he gazed apprehensively at a target nailed to a big oak. He'd practiced loading and unloading with empty cartridge cases provided by Roy; but now, with live rounds in the gun, there was a sickening feeling in his stomach. He realized that if he handled the weapon carelessly, he really *could* kill himself.

As Roy had instructed, he held his arms out straight and cocked the pistol. Timidly, he began exerting what he thought was a very light pressure on the trigger.

BLAM! The gun went off almost instantly, catching Walter by

surprise. The barrel flew upward. The bullet didn't even hit the tree.

Amazed at his inability to control the bullet's flight, Walter peered openmouthed at the target for a moment. Then he held the pistol out and cocked it again. He hadn't imagined it could be like this, but if other people, including girls like Miss Feist, could master pistol-handling . . .

The second shot missed the target but at least hit the tree—just barely.

The third missed the tree again.

Doggedly, Walter raised the pistol once more. Then he stopped. What the hell, Mrs. Brill had been right. He was just an old fool, and maybe not just about the gun. Maybe he'd been an old fool about a lot of other things. Oddly depressed, he picked up his cane, limped to the house, put the gun on a kitchen table and mixed a martini.

It made him feel better. He mixed a second drink, got his tape recorder and limped onto the dock. There was a platform, with chairs, at the end. While waiting for Miss Feist, perhaps he could dictate some memos.

He dictated one, finished the drink and settled back, eyelids heavy. What was delaying Miss Feist? She should have been there by now. Where could she be?

He fell asleep.

A scrape of shoe leather on the dock awakened him. He swiveled in the chair—but it was not Miss Feist behind him, it was Mrs. Brill. Eyes bright, she held the pistol in front of her with both hands, in the prescribed method. The muzzle was pointed at Walter's head.

"Just what," he managed to ask, "do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to kill you. I've already been poisoning you slowly. It's why you've been so sleepy lately. But when you bought this gun today, I decided to get it over with now."

"I don't understand. Kill me? For heaven's sake, why?"

"For the money you left me in your will. I've known about the bequest for years. I go through your papers all the time."

"But if you've known that long, why wait until now to kill me?"

"Because I've given up hope. Why do you think I've been starving myself, trying to keep my figure for so long? Sooner or later, I was sure you'd come to your senses and notice *me*. Then we'd get married, and I'd get *all* your money."

"You?"

"Of course. But it's obvious now, you'll never marry again.

You're having too much fun playing with the likes of your Miss Feist. So I think I'll just take what money I can get in your will . . ." her eyes strayed to the tape recorder, ". . . and after I kill you, I'll take the recorder with me. I'll just leave your body here, for Miss Feist to find. Incidentally, she said she'd be here tomorrow, not tonight. I lied about that, so I could get you here alone. And after she finds your body tomorrow, we'll let *her* explain to the police what she was doing here in the first place. A dirty old man like you, fooling around with that snip at your age, you really *deserve* to die . . ."

Her finger tightened on the trigger. Nothing happened. She squeezed harder.

Of course. Suddenly, Walter understood. Her uncle's police revolver had been a double-action. She assumed all she had to do to fire was to pull the trigger. She didn't know you had to cock a single-action pistol first, pulling the hammer all the way back.

The cane still lay across Walter's lap. He grabbed the handle and thrust the tip into Mrs. Brill's stomach. With a grunt, she fell backward into the water, which at the end of the dock was twenty feet deep.

Walter looked down and watched her floundering attempts to save herself. Could she swim? No, she'd told him once she couldn't swim a stroke. Her head went under, came up and then went under again. She was, Walter realized, going to drown before he could possibly summon help.

Drown? Well, the whole conversation was on his tape recorder. It was clearly a case of his taking her life to save his own.

His eye caught the glitter of the gun, now lying under the water on a sandy bottom.

How ironic; if it weren't for the gun, Mrs. Brill would probably have succeeded in poisoning him to death. So while it had not happened the way Miss Feist had thought, at least she had been right about one thing. The gun had given him self-protection.

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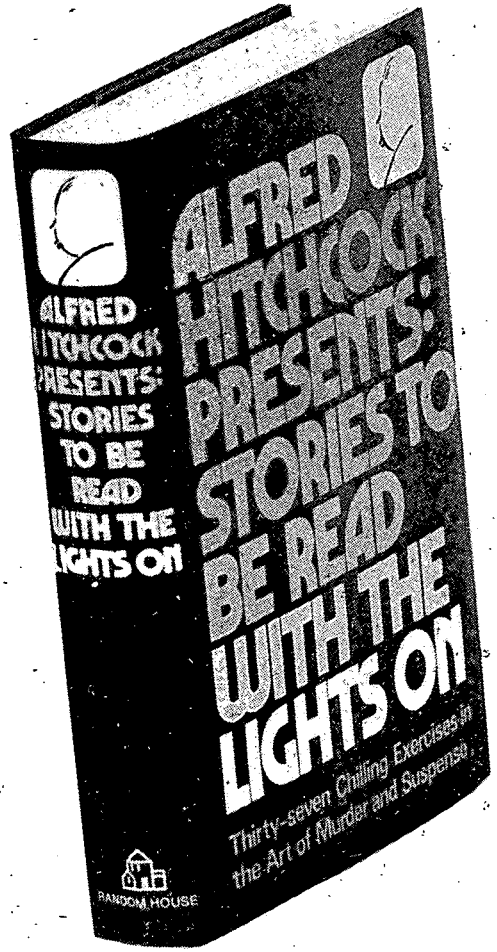

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Poetic justice may not always tip the scales in the right direction.

Brotherly Love

by Donald Olson

Walter Bly's office was on the seventh floor of a milk-white building on Wilshire Boulevard. On his one previous visit Malcolm had got no farther than his brother's secretary, an icicle named Thrale, who had informed him that his brother was much too busy to see him, which meant that Malcolm had been unable to touch Walter for a loan and had been forced to sell his ruby-and-diamond cuff links, the last mementos of a transitory affluence, in order to sweeten the tempers of some irate gentlemen from Reno.

This same secretary now ignored the gracious smile of forgiveness Malcolm wasted upon her, nor was his brother's greeting even a shade more cordial.

"You said it was a matter of life and death, so I'm giving you my lunch hour," Walter announced.

"Thanks loads. But you might have given me lunch as well."

"This office is more private than a restaurant. I've got to be at the studio by two, so make it snappy."

Malcolm leaned back and let his eyes explore the office: Swedish Modern chairs and tables, an abundance of silvery sharp accessories, a dagger-leafed snake plant. Not a curve in sight, and that included the icicle outside. Malcolm could imagine the decorators taking one look at Walter and Miss Thrale and knowing precisely what sort of decor was indicated. The ash tray on the table beside him was Swedish crystal and spotless, and he lit a cigarette just for the pleasure of dirtying it.

"Well, speak up, Malcolm. What did you want to tell me?"

"It's about Ruthie. She didn't actually *fall* from that sun deck, Walter. I murdered her."

He had looked forward with a great deal of relish to the look that now spread over Walter's fat face, although for a moment or two he was seriously afraid his brother might have a stroke—which would ruin everything.

"To be precise about it, Walter, I *flung* her over the railing. You know, it's truly astounding what strength a guy possesses when he's insane with rage and the slightest bit stoned," Malcolm said calmly.

Walter quickly recovered himself and started fiddling with a desk lighter as he glared at Malcolm. "You've got a lot of nerve wasting my time with a cock-and-bull story like that. Ruthie's death was an accident. The police said so. I talked to Lieutenant Creel myself."

Malcolm pulled a long face. "I know. That's the pity of it. It was a perfect murder—which is something to brag about considering it was one of those crazy spur-of-the-moment things. A perfect murder—up to a point."

He described the argument with Ruthie, admitted they were both drunk, and claimed that he had lost his head and struck her, then picked her up and flung her over the railing.

"As you know," Malcolm went on, "the autopsy showed she was drunk. They couldn't prove I had been there. Voilà—accidental death."

Walter's eyes gleamed knowingly. "You mean the cops were satisfied but not the insurance people, is that it?" He said this with obvious satisfaction.

"Oh, not at all. They've been so cooperative and sweet about everything they've practically restored my faith in TV commercials."

"Then just what is the issue?"

Malcolm squashed out his cigarette as messily as possible. "The issue, brother dear, is one enterprising young body freak named Artie Fletcher. He lives in that apartment house next door to my place—the guy Ruthie called Mr. Hollywood. He hangs out at the beach and he's sort of into porno photography, from what I've found out. Funny—I always figured those muscle guys were all brawn and no brain. Not this bird. He dropped in on me a week ago and showed me a bunch of photos he'd taken of Ruthie sunbathing on the deck in the nude. And then he whips out another batch, infrared jobs, of me and Ruthie the night she died. Seems the eye of science was upon us. What he had was a series of action stills of the whole sordid little scenario. Need I go on?"

"You bloody fool!"

Malcolm bowed his head. "I know. But when you're as mad as I was that night you don't stop to make sure no one's watching before losing your temper. Besides, it was late at night."

"Since you're still walking around free I assume his game is blackmail?"

"Right on."

"How much?"

"All of it."

"All of what?" he demanded.

"My dear Walter, I'm afraid my little confession has paralyzed your powers of deduction. *All* the insurance, of course—when I get it. Fifty grand. Until I do get it I'm penniless, as I'm sure you know. If this creep has his way I'll be in the same boat *after* I get it. Don't look so pleased, Walter. It's a very sad story."

"I can only advise you to pay up."

"That's what you would do?"

"If it were a choice between that and going to jail for murder, what do you think?" He added dryly, "Or did you expect to get rid of your wife and make a handsome profit as well?"

"Still, how can I trust him? He claims he'll give me the pictures and negatives when I pay up, but you know what blackmailers are like."

Walter snorted. "Indeed I do not. Only he'll soon find out there'll be nothing more to be squeezed out of you. Furthermore, he's made himself an accessory after the fact. You ever think of that?"

"Of course I've thought of it, damn it all. But so what? I came here for your help, not a lecture on the obvious."

"I hardly see how I can help."

Malcolm got up and ap-

proached the desk, resting his hands on the edge and leaning forward. "Then let me explain. You can help by going to this creep and telling him I've confessed everything to you and begged for your help. That you dislike me and disapprove of me. I'm nothing but a bum and a leech in your opinion. That *is* your opinion, isn't it, Walter? And you tell him you're quite prepared to spill everything to the cops. However, since you do have some feeling for family honor and all that garbage, you offer him something for the pictures. And you tell him he'll either have to be satisfied with that or you'll have him arrested as an accessory to murder."

Walter's immediate response to this plea was a grunt of skepticism.

Malcolm leaned closer, smiling. "Well?"

"Preposterous. Why should I do any such thing?"

Undismayed, Malcolm returned to his seat and sprawled back with an appearance of total comfort. "Well, not out of brotherly love. I know you too well for that. But for that old devil profit motive, that's why." He had come within a whisper of using the word greed, but at this delicate juncture he thought better of it.

"I don't understand. Profit?"

"*You* not understand the profit motive? In that case I am wasting my time."

"Don't be smart with me, Malcolm. I warn you."

"Walter, listen, OK? You offer this Fletcher character ten grand, free and clear. When I get Ruthie's insurance money I pay you back—with interest."

Walter scoffed, though not too convincingly. "You really think I'm that mercenary? You're more depraved than I thought. I've got a strong notion to go to the police and repeat everything you've told me."

"Oh, I'd deny it. So would he. Without his evidence nothing could be proved. It would never reach a courtroom, and you know it."

Malcolm was well aware that all this moral quibbling was purely academic. He could almost see the pros and cons and maybes sifting through Walter's mind.

Finally, with a glance at his watch, Walter gave his decision. "If I pay this fellow the ten thousand I shall expect to double my money."

"*Twenty* thousand?"

"Not a penny less."

"You're talking usury!"

"You're talking murder!"

Malcolm tried to make his in-

dignation sound real. At last, as if grudgingly, he agreed to Walter's terms. "I suppose I should thank you for saving my skin."

"Saving you from the poorhouse, that's what you mean."

"There's a difference?"

Life was rosy once more as Malcolm emerged from the office building into the smog-laden sunshine. Improvident by nature, he worried no more about tomorrow's problems than about today's debts or yesterday's mistakes. What concerned him now was the lively idea of going down to Mexico to look for some fresh action. He knew he couldn't stay within shooting distance of Walter, and Mexico had always appealed to the adventurous side of his character. He felt that the very atmosphere down there would inspire him and he was aglow with confidence as he drove back to the beach.

After a quick shower he went out for a beer and then leaped aboard one of the open-air trolley cars of the Venice Tram Line that shuttled between the Santa Monica Pier and the sleazy arcades of Venice, his face turned toward the shimmering Pacific and the crowds enjoying the last perfect days of the beach season.

He shaded his eyes when they reached that part of the beach where brawny young men practiced handstands on parallel bars or swung agilely from trapeze rings set in the sand. Their monkeylike exertions amused him; he thought there was something gallantly hopeless about these boys who had surrendered themselves to a life of ritual without reason.

From where he sat he could make out the figures of Artie Fletcher and his dainty female partner, Tina, executing some graceful but complicated gymnastic routine. Malcolm jumped off the trolley and plodded across the sand toward them.

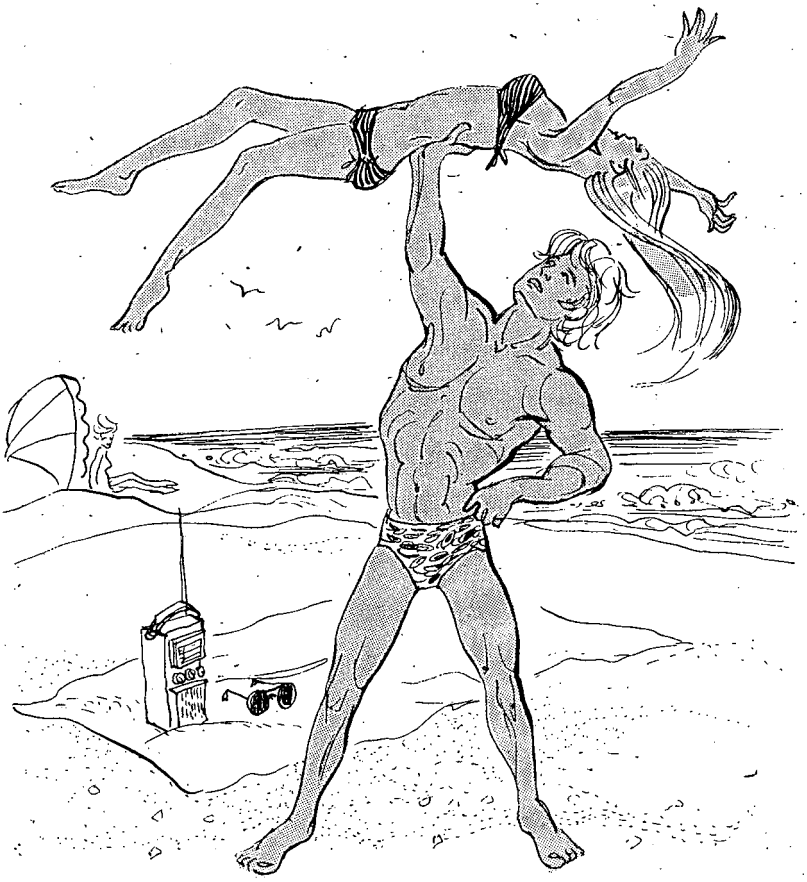
Artie was balancing his petite partner on the palm of one hand held straight above his head, but when he saw Malcolm approaching he let the girl down and sent her away.

Fletcher was a strikingly well-developed young man with a weight lifter's massive torso and arms and such a narrow waist and sleek hips that he looked somewhat top-heavy. He had the stolid, vain face of a torchbearer in an epic film who dreams of someday being the star.

"You saw your brother?" was the first thing he asked.

"I did. I told him my story about the big bad blackmailer and he swallowed every morsel of it."

"And he really believes you did



murder your wife?" Artie asked.

"Oh, I *knew* he'd believe that part."

"So what's next?"

"I told him I'd set up a meeting with you tonight in Palisades Park."

"Hey, solid, man. I got to thinkin', though."

"Leave the thinking to me," Malcolm said.

"Yeah, sure. But you said your brother's got all these connections with the studios. So I think I'll hit him with one more condition."

"Now, hold on. *I'm* the one who planned this thing. And you agreed to play along."

"I am playin' along, pal. But for what I'm gettin' outa this I deserve a little bonus. I'm gonna tell him he's gotta get me and Tina a job. Or at least a good agent."

Malcolm's frown slid away, replaced by a thoughtful smile. It might be a rather neat stroke, when he thought about it. Added a certain note of authenticity; not that the plan wasn't foolproof as it was.

Yes, for once in his life he had put one over on big brother Walter, the V.I.P.—since there was one thing Walter hadn't known about that insurance policy on Ruthie: it had lapsed for failure to pay premiums six weeks before Ruthie fell to her death. The police knew it, but Malcolm had deliberately refrained from telling Walter, knowing how greatly the irony of it would amuse his brother.

Several days after Ruthie's funeral Malcolm had been listlessly wandering along the beach trying to think of ways to replenish his depleted bank account when his attention had been drawn to a young man and woman practicing their tumbling routine on the sand. The girl was an accomplished gymnast, and as Malcolm watched her practically fly through the air and land so nimbly on her feet, a picture flashed through his mind of Ruthie falling from the sun deck and dying of a broken neck, an event which no one, including Malcolm, had actually witnessed. Malcolm had arrived home some two hours later and found her body.

As he watched the gymnast and his partner that afternoon on the beach he made believe that someone *had* seen Ruthie die, made believe that someone *with a camera* had seen him murder Ruthie and had the photographs to prove it. Once this idea had planted itself in Malcolm's brain he played with it as nimbly as that muscular athlete played with his partner's body. Yes . . . the girl herself was about the same size and build as Ruthie, and with a wig and the same outfit and shoes, and by making sure the angle of the shots did not show her face directly, it could be Ruthie. The longer he thought about it the better he liked the idea. Restage Ruthie's accident to make it look as if he had murdered her, and with pictures to prove it; make up a blackmail yarn and appeal to Walter to pay off the blackmailer; and tell him later he'd share the insurance money with Walter . . .

A few afternoons later he had struck up an acquaintance with the pair and a few weeks later,

for the sum of twenty-five hundred dollars, they had agreed to cooperate. Malcolm knew something about photography and he began giving Artie the necessary pointers.

Malcolm arrived at the designated meeting spot in Palisades Park several minutes before the other two and waited for them in the shadow of a drooping eucalpytus tree whose moon-stained leaves whispered softly in the damp ocean breeze; giant royal palms stood like sentinels above the fog-shrouded Pacific, car lights twinkling up and down the coast highway below them.

Walter and Artie Fletcher arrived within seconds of each other and responded to Malcolm's mockingly punctilious introductions with the grumbling wariness of boxers being introduced in the ring, whereupon Walter immediately took charge, as if they were there to discuss a proxy fight rather than murder and blackmail.

"My brother expected me to help him worm his way out of this trap you've snared him in, Fletcher. I refused. Our conceptions of morality are light-years apart. My brother has committed a vicious crime and I'm quite agreeable to his paying for it. I've told him I'll get him the best defense counsel money will buy. It's been established his wife was drunk when she died. My brother may go to prison—but it won't be for long. And you'll go to jail as well, as an accessory after the fact."

Artie's chest muscles rippled involuntarily. "You coulda called me on the phone and made that speech."

Walter cleared his throat. "It's a course of action I'm quite prepared to take. However, I'm sensible enough to wish to avoid if possible the publicity such a course would involve, as I'm sure you are. My brother has told me you have plans for a theatrical career. Notoriety has a way of blessing the famous, but let me assure you it curses the merely ambitious."

A sly note crept into Fletcher's voice. "A deal, you mean?"

"A deal, I mean."

"Spell it out."

"I'll pay you ten thousand dollars, in return for which you'll deliver to me all prints and negatives of the pictures you took. You'll forget you ever knew my brother or his wife."

"How do I know you ain't bluffin'?"

"You don't. Turn the deal down, by all means, if you wish to put it to a test. Maybe I am bluffing. Maybe you'll end up with the

fifty grand you're demanding. Maybe. And I assure you it's a mighty big maybe. Agree to my proposal and you'll get the ten thousand—once the material is in my hands."

Fletcher's calflike eyes, muscular-looking as the rest of him, swung balefully upon Malcolm, who smiled his charming, baffled-innocence smile and said sweetly, "You really ought to buy it, Fletcher. What is it the poet says, 'Take the cash in hand and waive the rest . . . '?"

Fletcher flexed his biceps. "So when do I get the bread?"

"I told you," Walter said. "Soon as I get the pictures and have examined them."

Fletcher looked swiftly from Walter to Malcolm. "Make it the deck at the Spa Health Club. Eight o'clock tomorrow night."

Walter agreed to this, as well as to Artie's demand for professional assistance, and the meeting ended; Fletcher walking away through the park, Walter and Malcolm heading back to Walter's car.

Walter didn't open his mouth until they'd reached the house and Malcolm was getting out of the car. Then he said, "You understand, I hope, that those photographs will remain in my possession until you've repaid me. And, Malcolm, a word of brotherly advice. If you should happen to get itchy feet or do anything foolish like trying to welsh on me, I promise you I won't lose any time in turning those pictures over to the cops. Anonymously, of course. And if they should fail to track you down, don't worry, *I* will. Is that quite clear?"

"Fraternal affection," murmured Malcolm, closing the door. "Isn't it touching?"

He stood grinning after the departing car and whistled a bright little tune as he went inside and fixed himself a drink. Yes, things were definitely looking up. In a couple of days he would be far away from here, deep down into Mexico with a grubstake of respectable if not ample proportions, and such was the extent of his self-deception he never for a moment admitted that he intended to welsh on Walter. He was so habitually optimistic he really believed he'd be able to parlay that modest windfall into fifty thousand dollars, out of which he would dutifully repay Walter his twenty grand and still be very well situated himself.

At nine o'clock the following night Artie called him. "Hey, man, your big brother came through. I've got the bread, he's got the pictures."

"Terrific! Come on over."

"I better not, man. I think some dude's bird-doggin' you. His car's been across the street for hours."

Malcolm smiled. Leave it to Walter—he liked to protect his investments. "Stay put, then. I'll see you at your place. I'll come up the back way."

He was rather delighted that Walter was adding a bit of zest to the game. So far everything had been too easy. He changed into dark slacks and a black pullover, left the house by way of a window under the sun deck, crept along the strip of beach and through the back door of Artie's apartment building, where he nearly collided with a woman on her way out. She was carrying a Pekingese which yapped in Malcolm's face. The woman gave Malcolm a sharply suspicious glance as he pushed by her.

Artie was waiting for him, stripped to a pair of boxer's trunks and working sweatily on his "lats" with a pair of barbells. Tina sat cross-legged in the corner in a yoga-like trance. Artie finished his set, flung a towel around his shoulders and went to the refrigerator for a cloudy-looking glass of some exotic health drink.

"So let's see the bread," Malcolm demanded.

Artie snapped his fingers at Tina. "Hey, kid, go finish your meditations in the bedroom. Mal and I have things to discuss."

Tina sulkily unwound herself and disappeared into the other room. Artie waited till the door was shut, then opened a cupboard door and took out a tan beach bag, from which he spilled hundred dollar bills into a pile on the floor. Malcolm got down and began counting them as Artie watched.

"There you are," Malcolm said presently, shoving a smaller pile toward the body-builder. "Easiest two-and-a-half grand you'll ever make."

Artie gulped the last of his drink and burped noisily. "It ain't enough."

Malcolm stared. "How's that again?"

"It ain't enough. I'm in this deep as you. I took more of a risk than you did. I figure we oughta split it down the middle."

Malcolm, although he wasn't aware of it, looked strikingly like his brother at that moment. "Don't get cute, Artie."

"I want half."

"Drop dead."

"Otherwise I think your brother might like to know you ain't ever gettin' no insurance payoff—and he ain't ever collectin' no twenty grand."

Malcolm felt as if he were

sweating on the inside. Part of him had more or less anticipated something like this; it was a risk he'd had to take, a minor one he'd thought, because he'd had Artie figured for a dope, a big dumb muscle-crazy beach bum who wouldn't get greedy.

"This your idea or Tina's?"

"That dumb broad? She ain't never *had* an idea."

Suddenly Malcolm lost his temper, began screaming at Artie, who quickly grabbed him and clapped a big hand over his mouth. "Pipe down, you idiot! These walls are like tissue paper."

While they'd been talking, Malcolm had been shoving the money back inside the beach bag. Now he made a grab for it as he shoved Artie aside and streaked for the door. Artie caught him with a flying tackle and they both landed on the floor with a thud that shook the lamps. They wrestled but Malcolm was no match for Artie, who yanked him roughly to his feet and gave him a couple of ungentle cuffs to the jaw to settle him down. Then he calmly removed his additional twenty-five hundred from the bag and shoved the bag into Malcolm's arms.

"Now take it and split, before I really get greedy and latch onto the whole wad."

Malcolm, still gasping for breath and frightened by the way his heart was thumping, meekly went out the front door. Again he met the woman who had been airing her dog as he walked along the gallery toward the stairs. This time she looked at him even more suspiciously. He palm-brushed his hair and licked the little bubble of blood off his lip, then patted it gingerly with his handkerchief.

Once he'd had a shower and a couple of belts of whisky he felt well enough to resume packing. Unsatisfactory as it was, he was still five grand richer than he'd been that morning, and in less than an hour he was on his way to Mexico.

They arrested him at San Ysidro on suspicion of murder. Not Ruthie's murder, as it turned out, but Artie Fletcher's. Malcolm was dazed, unbelieving. Allowed one call, he placed it to Walter. Walter wouldn't dare turn him down. Walter would clear up everything.

When he visited Malcolm in his cell, Walter's face was anything but compassionate. "You're an imbecile, Malcolm. You always were."

"But *I* didn't kill Fletcher!"

Walter lowered his voice. "Of course you didn't. You wouldn't have the brains or the guts."

The look in Walter's eyes could

mean only one thing. Malcolm drew back. "You mean *you* killed him?"

"Did you really think that blackmailer would have let you off the hook for ten grand? You think he wouldn't have put the screws on you for every penny of that insurance money, just like he said? Now listen, you came to me with this mess and expected me to help you. Well, I helped you, brother dear. I took care of the matter as it should have been taken care of." He looked at Malcolm with utter disgust. "And what did you do? You go running to that creep and swipe five grand. Of *my* money. Hell, even my own man, the operative I had keeping tabs on you, will be subpoenaed to confirm he saw you coming out of Fletcher's apartment. No, don't deny it, Malcolm. There was only five grand in his apartment. They found five grand on you. They've got some dame who saw you sneaking up the back way in that apartment house, and she saw you coming out with a bloody lip. The neighbors said they'd heard a quarrel and a terrific thud, as if someone had hit the floor, hard."

Malcolm seized his brother's hand. "Well, you know I'm innocent. You can get me off."

"And hang myself? Malcolm, don't be dumb. Whatever they dish out to you will be less than you deserve. You murdered Ruthie even if you didn't kill Fletcher. So now you pay. Poetic justice."

Malcolm released his hold on Walter's hand and slouched back on his hard narrow bunk. "You're wrong, Walter. I didn't murder Ruthie. Everything I told you about that was a lie. Her death really was an accident. I wasn't even there when she fell."

Walter looked at Malcolm as if he were hopelessly sick. "Oh, stop it, Malcolm. I've seen those pictures, remember?"

"They're as phony as my story." Then he confessed the whole plot to Walter, exactly how he and Artie had conned him into handing over ten thousand dollars. Walter's face grew stonier and whiter with each word.

When Malcolm finished he looked at his brother with a beseeching expression. "I didn't go to Artie's apartment to steal that money from him. I simply went there to collect my share. I never thought it would end like this." Once more he touched his brother's arm. "Walter, I swear I'll repay you—with interest. As soon as this is cleared up and I get out of here I'll devote every hour of my life to getting your money back to you. I swear that,

Walter. I give you my word on it."

Walter sneered. "The only thing worth less than your word, Malcolm, is your promise." He turned to go. "Besides, there's no way you can clear this up. No way at all. You'll just have to take your medicine."

Malcolm bestowed a small, superior smile upon his brother. "Oh, there's a way, Walter. When I was in Artie's apartment we weren't alone. His girlfriend, Tina, was there too. She can give me all the alibi I need. All you have to do is get hold of her and make her tell the truth."

A couple of days later Walter returned and gave his brother a sour look. "It's no good. The girl swears she knows nothing about you—that she never even met you. And that she knew nothing about Fletcher's activities and hadn't been near him for two days."

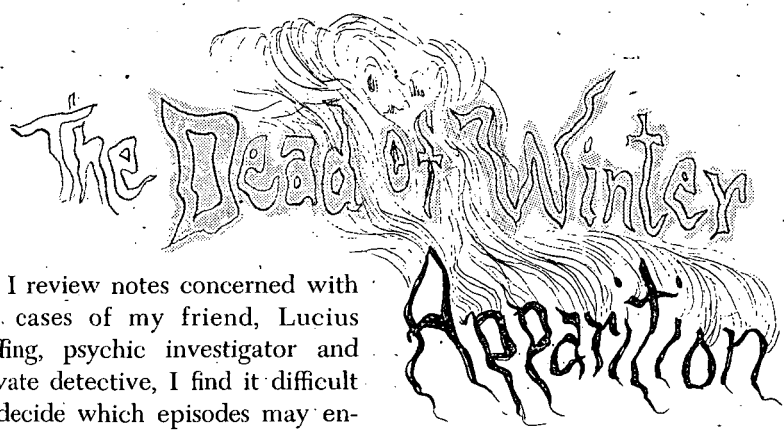
This only brought a smile to Malcolm's face. "She's a lying little tramp and you can make her eat those words. Do you think I'd have let Artie take those pictures without some kind of insurance that they wouldn't somehow get me trapped into a murder charge for real? I know you think I'm dumb, Walter, but I'm not that dumb. It was completely overcast the night Ruthie died. And no moon. The night we staged that phony murder there was a clear sky and a full moon. You can see it in those pictures. That'll prove they weren't taken the night Ruthie died. Just point that out to the girl. Tell her she better give me that alibi or you'll prove she was in collusion with Artie in faking those pictures. Show them to her. She'll talk. She'll alibi me."

Walter regarded his brother with a look of somber contempt. "Impossible. Once Fletcher was dead I had no use for those pictures, except to hold them over your head. And there was only one way I could be absolutely sure you wouldn't be able to steal them from me."

Though his body didn't move, Malcolm felt himself sinking. "You didn't—"

"Yes, Malcolm, I did. I burned them."

This may be a haunting reminder not to lose one's temper.



As I review notes concerned with the cases of my friend, Lucius Leffing, psychic investigator and private detective, I find it difficult to decide which episodes may entail the most reader interest. A case which intrigues one reader leaves another indifferent. The best I can do, therefore, is to rely on my own far from infallible judgment and hope for the best. Although for various reasons Leffing refused many cases, it will never be possible for me to record all of his exploits. My time and energies have become far too limited.

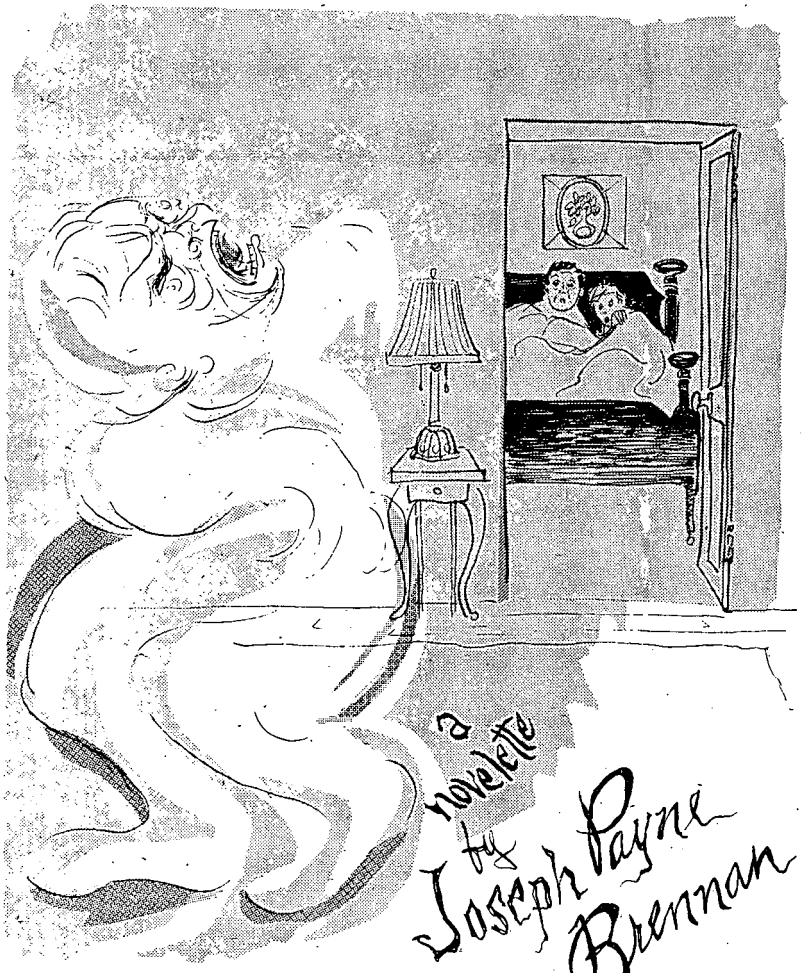
One case, however, which has haunted me down the years, I find outlined under the title *The Dead of Winter Apparition.*

The business began in rather routine fashion. One winter evening, over a decade ago, Leffing telephoned to tell me that he expected two prospective clients, a husband and wife, to visit him the next day. He knew little about the case and was by no means sure he would accept it, but he cordially invited me to be "on hand," as he put it, in the event he followed through on the investigation.

Late on the following afternoon he cheerfully welcomed me into his little Victorian-furnished house at 7 Autumn Street. Only a few minutes elapsed before the door chimes sounded and I was introduced to a Mr. and Mrs. Paul Pasquette.

Pasquette was a somewhat undersized, stocky individual with black hair and eyes. The suggestion of a scowl appeared to be permanently etched into his forehead lines. He possessed a ready smile, however, which quickly transformed his features. The scowl vanished and his dark eyes seemed alight with good humor.

His wife Viola, frail and blonde, was taller than he by a good two inches. Had it not been for sunken cheeks and frown lines of worry,



she might have been decidedly attractive—even striking in appearance.

Both the Pasquettes were obviously laboring under some kind of nervous strain. They appeared apprehensive, subdued and ill at ease.

Paul Pasquette began speaking with hesitation and reluctance. "Maybe you'll think we're both crazy, Mr. Leffing, but this thing has gone on too long and we can't take much more. We went through it last winter and we hoped that was the end of it, but now it's started again—". He broke off as if groping for words.

Leffing tried to reassure him. "Believe me, Mr. Pasquette, I am firmly convinced that both you and your charming wife are totally sane, normal individuals. Please start at the beginning, take your time and explain matters as best you can."

Pasquette resumed. "It commenced, I suppose, two years ago this past summer when we bought a tiny house up in the township of Comptonvale—that's in Tolland County, far northwest corner. We were tired of apartment-living; we like the country and I don't mind driving to work.

"The house was very small—only two undersized rooms and a kind of kitchenette—but it still seemed a bargain at the price. A little land went with it—enough for a garden and a yard. We were short of ready cash after buying the place but we fixed it up a bit and settled in. Everything went fine through the rest of that summer and into the fall. We didn't notice a thing wrong until the weather began to get real cold. That was late October—it's often twenty degrees colder in Comptonvale than it is here in New Haven on the coast."

Leffing nodded. "I have experienced a few winters in northern Connecticut! Nothing like Maine, but severe enough for me!"

Pasquette's scowl deepened as he groped for words. "It's hard to explain just how it started. First, we both got edgy, jumpy. We didn't sleep well. Finally we both admitted that we were often having nightmares. Most of the time we couldn't remember the dreams in any detail. We just had a sense of something getting into the house, hating us, threatening us somehow—something filled with spite, a desire for revenge—I don't know what for!

"The colder it got the worse our dreams got. And then—I realize it sounds loony, Mr. Leffing—but the first time it snowed, it got worse than ever. It became so we dreaded snow. We could hardly

sleep at all. The whole house seemed filled with hate. We'd lie awake by the hour, while the hate seemed to come at us in waves. We could feel it some during the day, but it was always a hundred times worse at night. We couldn't *see* anything or *hear* anything. It was just this feeling of evil, sort of—what's the word?—enveloping us."

Pasquette paused, took out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead.

"It went on that way all winter. About the time we felt we couldn't stand another night in that house, the weather turned warm and we began to sleep better. The dreams faded away, not overnight, but in a week or two. By the time summer came, everything seemed normal. We both decided that maybe the stress of moving, of money problems and other pressures, had jangled our nerves so that we had begun to imagine things. Although we had talked of selling the house, we decided to stay."

He glanced at his wife. "But as the summer wore away and the first leaves began turning, I know we both began to get worried again. We had a wonderful October that year. The weather stayed warm during the day and there was only a light frost once or twice. I guess it's what they call Indian summer. Anyway it lasted right into November and we began to hope that our nightmares were behind us."

He shook his head. "We were living in a fool's paradise. About mid-November the weather turned bitterly cold; the very next day it started to snow. It was like some kind of signal. That first night we both had horrible dreams. The old feeling of hate and evil surrounded us again—stronger than before.

"We'd wake up from nightmares, but the nightmares didn't end even after we got awake. Hatred seemed to be eating its way into the house—into us! It was as if we were losing our minds. There weren't any neighbors for miles. Everybody up there liked us; we never saw anyone lurking around. The only wild animals of any size were deer and maybe a few bobcats.

"We began trying to doze during the early evening and stay awake later to see if we could glimpse anything. But, while the hate feeling grew worse, we still couldn't see anything—"

"Until," his wife broke in, "the awful blizzard!"

He sighed. "By evening, we could feel it coming. It got so cold we couldn't keep warm even

in that tiny house. Our wood stove stayed red-hot but still the cold got in. We looked out and saw the snow piling up, driven by a blizzard wind. We went to bed finally, almost in desperation. And that night we saw—something."

Leffing's eyebrows arched. "Indeed!"

Pasquette frowned. "We were lying in bed, wide-awake, with only the glow from the stove for light, when this aura of hate began to encircle us. It was worse than we ever remembered it. It was like some kind of pressure all around us. It built up—intensified—for what seemed hours. And all the time the blizzard got worse. The snow never let up and the wind howled and moaned around the house like some kind of living thing."

He paused. "I don't know just what time it was, but I'm sure it was well after midnight when we both noticed a kind of dim yellowish light becoming visible at one end of the house—not in the bedroom but in the adjacent livingroom. It looked like mist rising up off the floor. It swirled into a vague shape and swayed there, an inch or two above the floor. We were too petrified to speak at the time, but we both admitted later that the waves of hate and evil which we felt definitely came from this awful yellowish shape."

Leffing's eyes were alert with interest. "Can you describe this shape in any detail at all, Mr. Pasquette?"

Our client reluctantly shook his head. "It was too . . . amorphous. It seemed about four feet high and once—just for seconds—I thought I saw something like a face, all twisted up with rage. The thing seemed to keep flowing back into itself and swirling around. I don't know how long it remained; it seemed like hours but I imagine it was only a few minutes. In spite of our terror, both of us finally fell back on our pillows and, well, passed out—something between a faint and a sleep! That *thing* just kind of sapped our energies. I think we passed out from exhaustion as well as fright. When we came to, a gray dawn was filtering in. The blizzard was still raging. The snow and wind didn't stop until late that afternoon."

"I think you have described the incident very well," Leffing commented. "Do you have anything to add to it, Mrs. Pasquette?" he inquired, turning to our client's wife.

She hesitated. "My husband has told you all that I recall, but I might add this: that misty, horrible thing reminded me—momen-

tarily at least—of some type of evil, yellowish dwarf. Like my husband, I had the passing impression that just briefly the semblance of a face took shape within that swirling smoke—or whatever it was. The . . . face . . . wasn't at all clear but—" she shuddered "—it was hideous and filled with malice."

"Have there been similar incidents since the one you just described?" Leffing asked.

Pasquette resumed his role as spokesman. "Similar to some degree, but none as bad as that night. You see, we haven't as yet had another blizzard up there. Heavy snows a number of times, but nothing like a real blizzard."

Leffing put the tops of his long fingers together. "The . . . manifestation . . . always reappears when the area experiences a strong snowfall?"

Pasquette scrubbed his chin. "Well, yes. To some degree. It's almost like a—what would you say?—mathematical equation. The greater and more prolonged the snowstorm, the stronger the manifestation. Even without any snow, of course, we still have terrible dreams and that feeling of pulsating hatred never leaves the house entirely until the winter is over."

Leffing leaned back in his favorite morris chair and remained silent for some moments, in thought.

At length he sat forward. "I will accept the case. It has features which, if not unique, are at least intriguing!"

Pasquette sighed with satisfaction, but in a moment his scowl returned and he cleared his throat. "About your fee, Mr. Leffing. We—"

Leffing cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Do not concern yourself about it, Mr. Pasquette. My fees are always flexible."

I groaned inwardly. I knew that Leffing would sometimes accept a case for almost nothing, if it interested him sufficiently. His indifference toward money provided me with good story material but frequently left him hovering on the brink of hardship.

Before the Pasquettes left, Leffing elicited some further information: the name of the former owner, the agency which had handled the house sale and so forth. None of these facts appeared to offer any solid leads and I said as much.

Leffing glanced at me quizzically. "You should know my methods by now, Brennan! Every avenue must be explored, no matter how unpromising it may appear."

All the real estate agency could do was provide us with the name and address of the former owner,

a Mr. Charles Verton of Fairfield, Conn. The house had not been on their list until Verton decided to sell and turned the matter over to them. They knew nothing concerning prior owners.

After some difficulties, Leffing reached Verton by telephone and arranged for a visit.

One wintry evening we drove down to Fairfield. Verton lived in the select Black Rock residential area of the town, in a substantial frame house which appeared to have been newly renovated.

"A far cry from the Pasquettes' little home up in Comptonvale!" Leffing commented as we rang the bell.

Verton, a tall, muscular-looking man of middle age, with close-cropped gray hair and alert eyes, received us politely but without enthusiasm.

He revealed that he had bought the Pasquette house from the town of Comptonvale about three years before selling it. He described it as a "bloody mess." He had spent the purchase price several times over, he added, in order to make the place habitable. He mentioned that he had never intended to make the little structure a permanent home. He went up to Comptonvale on weekends during the summer and in the fall he used the small house as a sort of hunting lodge. He was ordinarily accompanied by four or five friends on his hunting expeditions. He admitted that the quarters were cramped, revealing that several of his friends began calling the house "the sardine shack."

He had never met the Pasquettes until the agency arranged for the closing. He appeared honestly mystified by the difficulties the new owners were experiencing.

After a reflective minute, he shrugged. "All I can say is that the place *was* infernally hard to heat in the autumn. And usually we didn't sleep too well. But I put that down to the fact that there were so many of us crowded together in there—not really room enough for the whole gang to stretch out comfortably."

As we drove back toward New Haven, Leffing glanced up at the wintry night sky. "I fear, Brennan, I shall have to spend some time in Comptonvale. Verton's sparse information does not move us ahead very far. You will be able to accompany me?"

I nodded vigorously. "Tomorrow, if you like."

"Make it the following day. I'll telephone Pasquette tomorrow and ask him to arrange accommodations for us somewhere in Comptonvale."

We started out two days later under blue skies. The weather was moderate for mid-December. As we drove north, however, the blue skies became overcast and a sharp wind arose.

We arrived in Comptonvale in time for lunch at the town's only inn, the Crestfield Arms, where Pasquette had already reserved rooms for us. The Crestfield Arms was an old, sprawling clapboard building with creaky floorboards and drafty halls. Central heating had been installed, but I became convinced that at least half the heat slipped away through the ancient building's countless crevices.

After lunch we drove out to see the Pasquettes. Their tiny house was several miles from the center of town.

They welcomed us warmly. It was evident that the cloudy skies and rising wind were already beginning to make them nervous.

The Pasquette house was indeed undersized but neat as the proverbial pin. The potbellied stove threw out a generous amount of heat.

After a somewhat cursory—or so it seemed to me—inspection of the premises, Leffing sat down in the livingroom.

Pasquette shook his head in frustration. "Now that you're here, everything seems fine. Wouldn't you know it would be that way!"

"There have been no new manifestations?" Leffing asked.

"Not since we got back. Just the bad dreams, but no worse than usual."

"A storm appears to be slowly building up," Leffing observed. "Suppose we make arrangements now to exchange lodgings sometime before it starts to snow!"

The Pasquettes eagerly acceded to the suggestion. It was agreed that as soon as it was obvious that a storm was about to begin, the Pasquettes would take over our rooms at the Crestfield Arms and we in turn would move into their little house.

We drove back to Comptonvale, spent the rest of the afternoon prowling about the town and returned to the inn for dinner. There were only a few people in the dining room and we secured a table near the large open fireplace. The meal was served in a leisurely, informal manner; the food was plain but carefully prepared and substantial.

As we sipped a liqueur after dinner, Leffing nodded toward the fireplace. "At the rate those sparks are rushing up the chimney, a storm is settling in."

He was right. The next morning we awoke to white skies and an icy wind. By lunch time a few

flakes were beginning to sift against the windows.

When we drove out to the Pasquettes at midafternoon, the flakes were falling more thickly—not large feathery flakes, but small hard ones that clicked audibly against the car windows.

The Pasquettes were packed and ready to leave when we arrived. They appeared both hopeful and apprehensive.

Mrs. Pasquette, in particular, seemed worried. "If anything happened to you, we could never forgive ourselves," she told Leffing.

He touched her shoulder reassuringly. "Have no fears, Mrs. Pasquette! We are merely about our business. I feel confident we can cope with whatever arises!"

Everything had been made ready for us. There was fresh bed linen, ample provisions, plenty of firewood stacked up and the telephone was in perfect working order—at least at the moment.

After watching our clients drive off through the snow, we sat down near the stove. "The place seems normal enough," I commented. "It will be a bit embarrassing if nothing whatever occurs!"

"If nothing whatever occurs," Leffing pointed out, "that in itself will provide a clue."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Leffing, on that cryptic remark."

"It will indicate," he continued, "that the manifestation, or whatever you choose to call it, has some personal relationship with the Pasquettes."

I remained skeptical. "If there *is* any manifestation."

"Well, we shall see. I scarcely think, however, that our clients would fabricate the entire series of events. I cannot see what earthly—or unearthly—purpose such a fraud would serve."

After a light supper, we sat in the livingroom and talked in desultory fashion. Snow continued to fall steadily; a frigid wind blew against the house.

As we sat on, a subtle feeling of uneasiness began to imbue me. I experienced a vague but mounting sense of apprehension. I felt as if the atmosphere in that small house was beginning to create a kind of pressure, almost imperceptible at first, but soon unmistakable in its intensity.

I glanced across at Leffing, who sat silent and motionless.

I shifted restlessly in my chair. "I think it's beginning."

"Unmistakably," he replied quietly. "I suggest we move into the bedroom, as the Pasquettes would probably do."

After turning out the livingroom lights, we retreated into

the bedroom. Leffing sat on one side of the bed; I on the other. The potbellied stove in the livingroom emitted an eerie red glow.

We sat without speaking while snow clicked against the windowpanes. Freezing blasts of wind buffeted the house at intervals.

The sense of pressure grew stronger. At length I began to feel acutely uncomfortable. An atmosphere of sustained hostility entered the house. In my own mind I identified this hostility with the increasing severity of the storm which raged outside, but I knew this was not actually the case. The storm merely set the stage, as it were. The hostility had its origin in some other phenomenon.

As we sat on, the aura of animosity closed in upon us like something palpable. Although the house became colder and colder, I could feel perspiration on my forehead. The pressure strengthened until it appeared to wash over us in waves of pure hatred—a hatred which seemed weirdly impersonal, mindless, almost infantile—and yet deadly.

Loosening my shirt collar, I looked over at Leffing. I was about to speak when I saw that he was staring intently at a particular spot in the livingroom.

Following the direction of his gaze, I at first saw nothing, but as I continued to watch, a faint yellowish glow became visible. It had the semblance of a dim reflection which arose from the floor itself. For a few minutes it was no larger than the flame of a candle, but by no means as concentrated. Although it remained dim and diffused, it slowly grew in size. At length it seemed to swirl up from the floor like an eddy of yellow smoke lifted by the wind. Maintaining an erratic but still discernible circular motion, it gradually grew in stature and sharpened in outline until it bore a repellent resemblance to some kind of amorphous but active and living entity. There was no doubt in my mind that the pulsations of rage and hatred, which now seemed to fairly pound at us, originated in this hideous yellow shape which had slowly materialized.

As we continued to stare at it, transfixed, the manifestation's circular motion slowly continued until the thing finally stood a good four feet in height.

Wind-driven snow hammered at the house; a fearful chill settled into the very marrow of my aching bones. Strangely enough, I felt that this indescribable cold emanated from the unearthly thing before us and not from the storm outside.

Leffing made no comment, nor did he move from the bed, but I knew that he was appraising our unwelcome "guest" with an all-observant intensity of which I was incapable.

As we continued watching, the swirling shape moved more slowly, and as its motion lessened, it coalesced until there gradually grew visible the monstrous caricature of something which might once have been human—a ghastly, hunched, spindly-limbed thing with the mockery of a face which expressed such hatred, rage and suffering as I never hope to witness again.

Even Leffing gasped with horror as that frightful countenance momentarily consolidated to mirror the churning hell within.

Shifting, slowly circling, blurring at intervals, it swayed there before us, an apparition escaped from hell, the full force of its hatred and fury now focused directly upon us.

For a few heart-stopping seconds, I felt that I might faint and that as I lay helpless the raging yellow shape would be upon me.

Just as I grew convinced that I was incapable of enduring the malignant thing's pulsations for one minute longer, its outline and features began to blur more frequently. Its hideous face dissolved back into a sort of greasy yellow smoke; its sticklike limbs disappeared and very gradually it diminished in height until at length it literally ebbed away into the floor.

I lay back against the headboard, trembling with a cold which was not physical in origin. I felt weak and exhausted, as if every last trace of energy had been wrung out of me, nerve by nerve and fiber by fiber. I believe that if the house had caught fire, I could not have moved to save myself.

Long minutes passed before Leffing spoke. "I believe we have seen the last of it for this night. The thing has succeeded in sapping our strength to an alarming degree. I suggest we attempt to get some sleep."

Neither of us cared to lie down on the bed. We propped ourselves up and tried to sleep. I dozed at intervals, tormented by tenuous but terrifying nightmares.

The dirge of the wind never ended; all night long drifts of snow grew deeper around the house.

Dawn was gray and grudging, but we welcomed it. We awoke in a house which had grown frigid and this time there was an obvious physical cause: the fire in the potbellied stove had nearly gone

out, letting the winter creep in.

Nursing the embers carefully, we soon had the stove glowing again. A few minutes later we sat down to a breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast and coffee. I felt that I might survive after all.

"What do you make of it?" I asked as we sipped our second cup of coffee.

Leffing looked out at the blowing snow. "The house has obviously become the focal point for an entity of peculiar but dangerous malignancy. At this phase I have no idea of its origin or intent. I believe, however, that consciously or otherwise, it does possess vampiric tendencies—not in the traditional sense, but in the sense that it tends to draw into itself the vital nervous energies of others. This probably sustains and strengthens it. Small wonder the Pasquettes look so peaked and worn!"

A few minutes later the Pasquettes telephoned and were relieved to learn that we had survived the night with nothing more than jangled nerves and depleted energies. Leffing arranged to meet them at the inn as soon as the town plow had cleared the roads.

Appearing about midmorning, the road crew not only plowed the main highway but cleared a path right to the Pasquettes' door. We drove off without difficulty. It was still snowing but the biting wind had finally subsided into occasional gusts.

In our rooms at the Crestfield Arms, Leffing described the events of the night to the Pasquettes in matter-of-fact fashion.

"I strongly urge you," he told the harassed couple, "to remain here at the inn until I have cleared up this diabolical business."

The Pasquettes wearily agreed. After lunch they drove off to get some clothes and gear from their house. They had already engaged a room for themselves at the inn.

We had dinner with them that evening. Leffing steered the conversation into casual channels until after the meal. Inevitably at that point, we returned to the topic which had brought us together in the first place.

The Pasquettes could add very little to what they had previously told us. The encounter which Leffing and I had experienced paralleled in large measure previous experiences of their own.

At one point Leffing asked Pasquette if he had ever inspected the cellar.

Pasquette shook his head. "There is no cellar."

Although he seemed surprised and somewhat disconcerted, Leff-

ing made no comment on that word.

A few minutes later, we retired to our respective rooms.

"Where to now?" I asked, settling into an armchair.

Leffing paced the floor restlessly. "Tomorrow morning I intend to look into the town clerk's files. There is a possibility that I may unearth some pertinent fact concerning that house."

By the time I awoke the next morning, Leffing had already left. In spite of feeling like a slacker, I enjoyed a late and leisurely breakfast.

My friend returned in time for lunch. "Any luck?" I inquired as we sat down.

He frowned. "Possibly. I discovered that the Pasquettes' house was originally a small school, owned and operated by the town. It stood abandoned for many years. I presume that is why Mr. Verton of Fairfield described it as 'a bloody mess.' He took it over from the town, you will recall, and spent a good sum on restoration. I am not sure, however, that this brings us any closer to the explanation we seek. I fear further digging is on the agenda."

"If there is anything I can do—"

"All you can do at this time is stand by. In fact I am not sure of my own next move."

He spent most of the afternoon sprawled in an armchair in our rooms, while I read. By evening he appeared to have arrived at some kind of tentative decision.

"You have a lead?" I asked.

"I have at present no more than a theory," he replied. "I expect to spend tomorrow morning at town hall again. It may turn out to be a complete waste of time, but I cannot afford to leave any possibility unexplored."

He would say no more and I knew better than to press him.

Early the next afternoon when he returned to our rooms at the inn, he appeared moderately hopeful but by no means ebullient.

"I may have a promising lead," he told me. "I unearthed the names of various local women who taught at the Pasquette house when it was used as a school many years ago. Most of these women are dead, but the town clerk, who is steeped in local history, has informed me that the last woman to teach at the little school, a Miss Maud Rasters, is still alive, though in extremely poor health. She is in her nineties now and is confined to a convalescent home in Windover."

"You believe she may provide a clue which will explain the manifestation?"

Leffing sat down and stretched

out his long legs. "She may, Brennan, she may. We can do no more than try."

The next morning we set out for Windover, a small town located about thirty miles from Comptonvale. The roads had been well cleared and we had no trouble in finding the Windover Rest Home.

The one-story, white-painted brick building was set back some distance from the road in the exact center of a large tract now covered with wind-driven snowdrifts. A few evergreens, all but buried in snow, clustered around the structure.

After introducing ourselves to the receptionist, we warmed our heels in the waiting room for about twenty minutes. At length the head nurse, a Miss Vanning, brisk and efficient-looking in a gleaming white uniform, swept in and asked why we wished to see Miss Rasters.

"It is a rather complicated business, Miss Vanning," Leffing explained, "but I can assure you that the happiness and perhaps even the sanity of two people may depend upon it."

Miss Vanning looked skeptical. After some hesitation, she replied. "Well, you may see Miss Rasters, but only briefly, and you must promise not to agitate her. Her condition is very nearly critical."

Leffing bowed. "We shall take no more time than is absolutely essential, Miss Vanning. And we shall do our best not to disturb the lady."

After leading us through a maze of corridors, Miss Vanning instructed us to wait outside a small room. She went inside and closed the door. After about five minutes, she reappeared and nodded for us to enter.

Miss Maud Rasters lay propped up in bed near the center of the compact room. Age and prolonged illness had reduced her to little more than a living skeleton. I doubt if she weighed ninety pounds. Her skin was blotched and yellow-looking. She lay back with her mouth open and gazed in our direction with filmy eyes which appeared to focus somewhere on the wall behind us.

After introductions, which Miss Rasters acknowledged with a vague nod, Leffing moved up closer to the bedside.

"Miss Rasters, I have learned that you were the last teacher at the little country schoolhouse at Comptonvale. Records indicate you taught there for over ten years. After you left, that school was abandoned by the town. I understand that a new, larger school was built closer to the center of

town. Is that information correct?"

At Leffing's words, the old woman stiffened to a kind of wary attention. Her clouded eyes sought my friend's face. She closed and opened her mouth several times before replying. "That . . . . is right. I taught there . . . last. Yes."

Leffing then went on to explain in detail the nature of the problem with which we were confronted. As he spoke, Miss Rasters shifted restlessly in bed. At length her growing excitement and agitation became obvious.

Miss Vanning stepped forward and felt her pulse. She frowned. "Gentlemen, I must ask you to leave. I cannot permit Miss Rasters to be disturbed any longer."

After a moment's hesitation, Leffing shrugged resignedly and started to turn away, but Miss Rasters' yellow claw of a hand fluttered out and plucked at his coat. Shaking her head, she spoke directly to Miss Vanning. "No. Let him stay. I can explain . . . everything. I have been . . . tormented . . . too long." Tears came to her filmy old eyes and ran down her face.

Miss Vanning was obviously unhappy, but after a brief minute or so of indecision, she sighed and lifted a bottle from a small medicine table which stood next to the bed.

"All right, Miss Rasters. But first take two of these." She shook two tablets from the bottle.

Miss Rasters swallowed the tablets with some water and returned her attention to Leffing.

As she began her story, Miss Vanning hovered by the door with an air of uncertainty. It was apparent to me that she didn't want to leave her patient but at the same time didn't want to intrude on any private matters.

Miss Rasters quickly resolved the dilemma. She beckoned for Miss Vanning to return to her bedside. "Please stay here. I want a witness I know."

Thus reassured, Miss Vanning stood by the bed while the old woman unfolded her story.

"I can't remember dates," she began, "but I can never forget what happened at Comptonvale, at that little schoolhouse. I'd taught there a year or so, and everything went well, when Martin Keeler started school. His parents were awfully poor and either he'd been born somewhat deformed or had grown so due to malnutrition. His shoulders stuck up higher than they should have and his arms and legs were like sticks. But he had a keen mind and he was perpetually in some kind of mischief. He

seemed imbued with a kind of feverish nervous energy which never ran out. From the very beginning he caused trouble. He kept that little school in a constant uproar. The other children found him amusing and often abetted his mischief."

Shaking her head, she sighed and sipped at a glass of water which Miss Vanning extended.

(I might as well say here that Miss Rasters' story was broken by many such interruptions. To include them all would serve no sensible purpose.)

"I put up with little Martin as well as I could," she went on, "but he taxed my patience sorely. He did not respond to either punishment or—well, cajolery. I made him stand in the corner; I whipped him; I scolded him incessantly. I had long talks with his parents. They were sympathetic, but if they took any measures, those measures were ineffectual. For a time I tried giving Martin special privileges, but he simply took mischievous advantage of them. Absolutely nothing had any effect on him. He was a born imp and an imp he remained—to the end."

Miss Rasters lay back in bed, not so much as if she were resting but more as if she were arranging her thoughts and words in coherent order. At length she continued.

"One bitter winter's day he became completely incorrigible. Hour after hour he kept the other children in a state of absolute turmoil. A storm was obviously approaching and a kind of electric tension seemed to fill the air. I tried to be tolerant and blame the unending uproar on the gathering storm, but toward the end of the school day, I simply—well—lost control. I gave little Martin Keeler the worst whipping he'd ever had. The room quieted down after that but, even then, Martin refused to cooperate. Although he stopped interrupting me, as he had been doing for most of the day, he sat scowling and refused to pay any attention to his lessons.

"For some reason this infuriated me more than his noisy outbursts had. Shortly before classes were to end, I told him that he would have to remain after the other children were dismissed. By this time the storm had started. The wind rose and snow began blowing past the windows."

She shook her head sadly. "I don't know what got into me. I should have known better. But foolish as it may sound now, I felt that my trouble with Martin had developed into a contest of wills—and I had to win, if I were to go

on teaching well in that school.

"Martin expected he'd get another whipping, worse than before, and I could see him steeling himself for it. But that wasn't what I had in mind.

"Although the children were unaware of its existence, underneath the school there was an unused dirt cellar. The only entrance or exit to it was a small trapdoor which was located under a carpet directly beneath my desk. I had discovered the trapdoor by accident one day when I was cleaning the carpet after school hours. Lifting the trapdoor, I saw a rickety wooden ladder leading down to little more than a scooped-out pit. There was nothing in it that I could see. I decided then that its existence had better be kept secret from the children. Would to God I had never discovered it!

"I decided that terrible day that I would give Martin the fright of his life—perhaps, I reasoned, it would bring him to heel.

"When we were alone together in the room, I pulled aside the carpet and opened the trapdoor. By this time the wind was howling outside and the snow was falling thickly, but I ignored it. Beckoning Martin up to the desk, I showed him the dark pit and ordered him down that brittle wooden ladder. I told him he was going to stay down there, with the door closed, until he was ready to fall on his knees, apologize for his past conduct and promise never to cause trouble again.

"He went down the ladder with a great deal of hesitation, but without a word of protest. I slammed the trapdoor, put the carpet back over it and sat there at my desk.

"I fully expected that within a very few minutes I would hear the little imp's cry of surrender. But, although the cellar was pitch-dark and freezing cold, not a sound came out of it.

"The longer I sat at my desk, the angrier I got. I was furious that my scheme was obviously not working. I had been sure that it would. I waited a half hour . . . an hour . . . and still there was no call from below.

"All this time the storm was building up. The wind moaned dismally over the growing drifts of snow. Gentlemen, at that point, the devil himself must have entered into me. I decided to steal quietly out of the schoolhouse and leave Martin in the cellar."

At the expressions of shock and disbelief which must have passed over our faces, Miss Rasters held up her hand.

"I know it sounds horrible now but—I try to tell myself, anyway—it wasn't as bad as it appears. I fully expected that as the cold grew really unbearable, Martin would climb back up the ladder, lift the trapdoor and make his way home." Tears trickled down her sunken cheeks. "Almighty God knows that I didn't intend what happened."

After regaining some measure of composure, she continued. "As I trudged home through the snow, I was still so angry that I scarcely noticed the severity of the storm. As things turned out, it was a real blizzard—one of the worst we'd had in years. Long before morning the roads were impassable. Huge drifts came halfway to the eaves.

"The next morning I felt guilty about what I'd done. For all his nervous energy, little Martin was really quite frail. I assumed he'd had a struggle fighting his way home through the storm.

"But he never reached home. About noon the next day, after the plows had been out and the storm had begun to diminish in intensity, Sirus Borton, one of the town selectmen, stopped at my house. Of course there was no school that day. Sirus told me that Martin Keeler was missing. He hadn't showed up at home and his folks feared he had been lost and overcome in the storm. The other children had already told their parents that I had kept him after school. Sirus wanted to know how long I had detained him."

Miss Rasters paused and took a labored breath. "Since that hour I have lived in hell. I have been haunted and tormented all my life. But let me go on.

"Instead of telling the truth, as of course I should have done, I lied glibly. I knew what was at stake. I assured Borton that I had kept Martin only a few minutes and that, in fact, I had walked part of the way home with him. When I left him, I said, he was less than a half mile from home.

"Borton believed my lies and many of the townspeople did also. Martin was such an unpredictable, devil-may-care little rascal, his next move could never be safely assumed to be the sane and obvious one. It would be just like him, many agreed, to wait until I was out of sight along the road and then go dashing off into the woods. It would not be beyond him to stay out deliberately in order to get me into trouble with the town authorities.

"From that day on the town was divided. A majority felt sympathy for me, but a minority sided against me—and never forgave.

"Quite naturally I assumed that

Martin had waited too long in the school cellar and had then been trapped in the storm. Search parties started out as soon as the snow stopped.

"Since many children lived on back roads which had not yet been plowed, school was called off for the remainder of that week. The morning after the blizzard, however, I bundled up and made my way to the schoolhouse. I don't know what prompted me. Perhaps it was some kind of intuitive warning. But I remember thinking that Martin might have left the trapdoor open and that if this were discovered, I would be in deeper trouble."

Trembling, she reached for the water, swallowed and set down the glass. "It was far worse trouble than I could ever have anticipated. When I first entered the school, I sighed with relief. All seemed in order. Even the carpet which covered the trapdoor was set back neatly in place. Too neatly, knowing Martin. As I looked at it, a strange foreboding overcame me. I twitched it aside and raised the trapdoor.

"Enough light filtered down so that I could see what had happened. The rickety wooden ladder had collapsed. Little Martin lay motionless on the dirt floor.

"Although I was overwhelmed with horror and shock, I went to work like a person possessed. I clung to the faint hope that a spark of life remained in the boy. Fighting my way through the drifts to a small supply shed in the rear of the school, I finally located a rope. I knew that there was no ladder on the premises. Returning to the schoolhouse, I dropped a shovel into that freezing pit, then I tied the rope to a leg of my desk, dropped the line through the open trap and slid down. I saw at once that there was no hope. Little Martin had frozen to death. The sequence of events was obvious. As the cold became unbearable, he had finally started up the ladder. When he was only part way up, the rotten wood had given way. The ladder had collapsed, hurling him to the hard floor of the cellar. One of his legs was grotesquely twisted; I assumed he had broken it in the fall. In spite of that, he had apparently fought to get out. His hands were nothing but raw bloody stumps of flesh. In his frenzy of fear and pain, he must have torn at the walls of the cellar, hoping perhaps to tunnel his way out. It was impossible, of course. At last he had mercifully frozen to death. He had not died peacefully, however. Even in the dim light I could see his face fro-

zen into a frightful mask of suffering and rage. I am sure he died hating and cursing me."

Following a long pause, during which Miss Vanning gave the old woman more tablets, Miss Rasters resumed.

"Most of the cellar floor was frozen hard, but there was one small area, directly beneath the potbellied stove on the floor above, where I managed to dig a shallow grave. I dragged the body of Martin into it and covered it as well as I could. I threw the shovel up through the open trapdoor and then—with the strength of desperation, I suppose—I managed to climb back up the rope. I returned the rope to the shed, came back and closed the trapdoor, covered it with the carpet and made my way home. If I was seen at the school, nobody attached any importance to it. I told several neighbors later that I had gone back to get a file of test papers for correcting.

"I taught in that school for three more years, haunted and tormented every minute of the time. Often I imagined I could hear Martin down there in the cellar, screaming and cursing at me. I remember looking up on occasions to see if the other children had heard anything.

"I felt as if Martin were down there alive, hating me, plotting revenge, scheming to get even somehow. I never dared stay in the school alone after classes were dismissed. I took all my papers home. Ten minutes after the last pupil had left for the day, I was out of there myself. It was horrible.

"During the winter months, tension built up in me until I often thought I would go mad. Sometimes I felt that I already had. When a storm was approaching, in the dead of winter, it seemed that pulsations of hate pounded up at me out of that ghastly little pit. More than once I felt impelled to blurt out the whole story to the children and let the chips fall where they would.

"It was only by a supreme effort of will that I managed to keep my self-control. Of course my health deteriorated. At last I managed to transfer to another town—yet I was still haunted by the memory of what I had done. My punishment has never ended—but it will end shortly, gentlemen, and I am not sorry. I have been tortured so long that I no longer fear death—nor what may come after."

She lay back, exhausted and overcome. Her filmy eyes closed; she breathed laboriously through her mouth.

Scurrying into action, Miss Vanning injected medication into the frail body of the woman and quickly ushered us from the room.

As we drove to Comptonvale through the desolate winter landscape, Leffing gazed moodily at the snow-covered tamaracks which bordered the highway.

"I trust you see the picture clearly enough, Brennan. The spirit, psychic residue—call it what you will—of Martin Keeler, earthbound by hatred, plus the physical and mental anguish which marked his tragic death, clung to that schoolhouse cellar grave. To such a surviving remnant, time has no meaning, no reality, as we know it. Decades may be no more than minutes. Over the years, moreover, his unforgiving spirit has reinforced itself, as it were, with the vital energies of those who remained in that schoolhouse. In the beginning, the force of hate and vengeance was quite naturally focused on Miss Rasters. But even with her departure, the haunting did not cease. The Pasquettes, although innocent of any involvement, have been partially drained of psychic strength by the unrelenting and vindictive attacks of this fearful residual survivor. Its power has grown until it now, as we know, has sufficient force to project itself in visible form. It has become, down the years, a vampiric projection of evil, bearing, perhaps, little actual resemblance to the original spirit of Martin Keeler. I might almost say that its hatred survives through force of habit, bizarre as that may sound."

"How can we be rid of it, then?" I asked.

"There may be one solution," Leffing replied. "With the removal of the remains of Martin Keeler from that cellar pit, the thing may dissipate—abruptly or gradually. It is impossible to predict."

I frowned. "One prosaic but vital problem puzzles me. Pasquette told you that the house had no cellar!"

Leffing nodded. "A good point. But I have little doubt that the original cellar pit was filled, either by the town, or by Mr. Verton of Fairfield, after he bought the school."

A subsequent investigation disclosed that the town itself had filled the cellar hole before offering the structure for sale. The town clerk told us that the dirt walls were caving in and that town officials, not wishing to spend any more than was necessary on the building, had simply packed gravel into the pit and sealed up the trapdoor.

The Pasquettes listened to our recital of Miss Rasters' confession with a mixture of horror, relief—and foreboding. They welcomed any solution to their problem, but Pasquette admitted frankly that he simply did not have sufficient money to move the house and dig out the old cellar hole.

Subsequently, town officials of Comptonvale held a private meeting, with Leffing in attendance, and agreed to shoulder expenses. The tiny house was moved aside with surprising ease and the old cellar pit was cleared of fill. In the dirt floor, exactly where Miss Rasters had indicated, the poor, twisted skeleton of Martin Keeler was found. Although no surviving relatives could be located, the remains were given Christian burial in the Comptonvale Congregational churchyard, at long last.

Long before her confession became public knowledge, poor old Miss Rasters had passed away.

After their house was shifted back to its original site, the Pasquettes moved back in, albeit with many misgivings. From that day on, however, the haunting ceased. The Pasquettes lived without fear and slept without nightmares.

I like to think that Leffing brought lasting peace not only to them and to a tormented old woman who must have paid many times over for a foolish and tragic act—but also to the spirit of a poor doomed child who had died after fearful suffering—filled with unforgiving fury and hatred, and a desire for vengeance so intense that it survived and transcended his own pitiful death.

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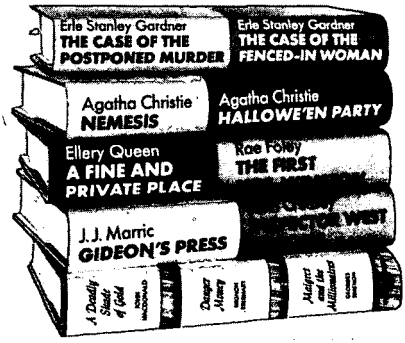

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